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ABSTRACT

This guide was developed to help Private Industry Council members and Job Training Partnership Act Service Delivery Area directors, planners, and program managers to develop new services by providing an introduction to the elements of effective basic skills programs. The guide is organized in three major parts. Part 1 reviews the research on the characteristics of at-risk youth and the needs of employers in order to highlight issues that must be taken into consideration in planning a basic skill strategy. Part 2 introduces the elements of effective basic skills program design based on a review of the literature and the experiences of successful practitioners. Among the issues discussed in the four sections of Part 2 are the role of competency-based instruction and some of the pros and cons of computer-aided learning; strategies for linking education and work; program elements that provide motivation and reinforcement; and aspects of a supportive learning environment. Part 3 provides a brief discussion of several key policy and performance management issues that must be addressed in order to establish a policy environment that supports and encourages basic skills programming. A seven-page bibliography is included in the guide. (KC)

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AN INTRODUCTION TO BASIC SKILLS EDUCATION FOR AT-RISK YOUTH: A DECISION MAKER'S GUIDE TO PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

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by
The Center for Human Resources
The Heller School
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

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PREFACE

During the past few years, basic skills education has become a vital element in Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA)-sponsored youth employment programs. According to a 1986 General Accounting Office survey, 57% of the JTPA Service Delivery Areas (SDAs) offered basic skills remediation to at least some young people as part of their summer programs; virtually every SDA provided at least some remediation in 1987. Telephone interviews by Brandeis University and the Center for Remediation Design in mid-1987 painted a similar picture of JTPA involvement in basic skills programming. Among 150 SDAs contacted, nearly all provided at least some basic skills training: 28% of the SDAs provided basic skills education during their summer programs, and another 69% included basic skills in both their summer and school year activities.[1]

The spread of basic skills programs throughout the JTPA system has been prompted by the increasingly powerful message that the ability to read, write and compute effectively is an essential requirement for employment, and that an unacceptably large proportion of disadvantaged young people have failed to develop those skills. It is a message that is now reflected in the 1986 JTPA Amendments, in the Department of Labor's growing policy emphasis on basic skills in its 1988 performance standards revisions, and in the various proposals for a new round of JTPA Amendments.[2]

A New Challenge for Practitioners. In responding to the basic skills challenge, many JTPA administrators and planners are moving into program areas that are new to them. Learning as they go, they are having to make difficult decisions about basic skills program design, curriculum development, supportive services, selection of contractors, and coordination with area educational institutions. 17% of those

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[1] U.S. General Accounting Office, Job Training Partnership Act: Summer Youth Programs Increase Emphasis on Education (June, 1987) and Summer Youth Jobs Program: Congressional Action Has Increased Emphasis on Remedial Education (September, 1988).

[2] The 1986 JTPA Amendments required every SDA to provide some basic skills remediation in its summer program. The 1988 performance standards revisions increased the emphasis on basic skills through tightened requirements for attainment of youth competencies and in the creation of a new "employability enhancement" youth standard. Many of the proposals for new JTPA Amendments in 1989, including those of the JTPA Advisory Committee, emphasized increased targeting of services to individuals who were deficient in basic skills. See the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Advisory Committee, "Working Capital: JTPA Investments for the 90s (U.S. Department of Labor, March, 1989).

responding to the initial GAO summer survey, for example, identified uncertainty about what constitutes a good program as the major impediment to providing summer remediation. At the same time, where basic skills education is offered, reports indicate that relatively small numbers of young people are being served. According to the GAO surveys, in both 1986 and 1987, the majority of summer programs offered remediation to less than half of those youth who needed it; in 1987, approximately 8% of summer program participants received educational services, and in 1988, 20% took part in remediation.[3] Information on year-round programs is spotty, but word of mouth suggests that in many SDAs, basic education programs are seen as limited experiments, often serving only small numbers for only a few hours a week. Discussions with individual practitioners and at youth employment roundtables have indicated that a chorus of questions remain concerning the bottom lines of basic skills program design. The demand for basic skills education is well-understood, but few practitioners feel they have the tools to make it happen.

A Guide for Decision Makers

This guide has been written by the Center for Human Resources at Brandeis University to answer some of the questions faced by PIC members, SDA Directors, planners, and program managers who are responsible for initiating, expanding or revising basic education programs in their communities. Our goal is to help policy makers, practitioners and others make informed decisions about the development of new services by providing an introduction to the elements of effective basic skills programs and a framework for thinking about the kinds of basic skills programs that are needed. To accomplish that goal, we have organized the guide in three major parts:

- Part I reviews the research on the characteristics of at-risk youth and the needs of employers in order to highlight issues that must be taken into consideration in planning a basic skills strategy. Its purpose is to help decision makers think about who they are serving and the kinds of skills that need to be developed.

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[3]GAO, Summer Youth Jobs Program, 15.

- Part II provides an introduction to the elements of effective basic skills program design based on a review of the literature and the experiences of successful practitioners. Its goal is to provide a list of benchmarks or guidelines that decision makers can use in establishing their own programs or in negotiating agreements with program providers. Among the issues discussed in the four sections of Part II are the role of competency-based instruction and some of the pros and cons of computer-aided learning; strategies for linking education and work; program elements that provide motivation and reinforcement; and aspects of a supportive learning environment.

- Part III provides a brief discussion of several key policy and performance management issues that must be addressed to establish a policy environment that supports and encourages basic skills programming.

Assumptions and Themes

We begin this discussion with several assumptions. The first is that basic skills education is not only needed, but that it is an essential element of any effective youth employment program. Whatever figures you use -- that 30% of young adults read below the eighth grade level; that nearly two-thirds of 17-25 year olds tested have trouble calculating change from a menu; or that 40% of those youth cannot follow written directions from one location to another -- the magnitude of the basic skills problem among young people is clear. At the same time, the basic skills requirements of even entry-level employment are rising. It has long been a familiar refrain that by 1990 more than three quarters of all jobs will require a high school diploma. In fact, that requirement has been here for some time: according to several studies, the materials commonly used in job training programs and on the job require a 10th to 12th grade reading level.[4] When a third or more of the country's youth cannot read the materials needed to learn, let alone do a job, basic skills education has to be part of any effort to improve employability.

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[4] Much of the current information on functional skills levels comes from a survey of 17-25 year old men conducted as part of the National Assessment of Education Progress. See Irwin S. Kirsch and Ann Jungeblut, Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults (Princeton, NJ: National Assessment of Education Progress, Educational Testing Service, 1986). Grade level figures and studies of reading levels required for work are reported in Thomas Sticht, "Functional Context Education: Workshop Resource Notebook" (San Diego, CA: Applied Behavioral & Cognitive Sciences, Inc., March, 1987).

JTPA Has a Role. The second assumption is that the JTPA system has an important role to play in building the basic skills of economically disadvantaged young people, though not by any means an exclusive one. Among American educational systems, JTPA has a unique capacity to build a bridge between basic skills education and work. More than twenty years of research in the Job Corps and other programs has demonstrated that, for young people who have been unable to succeed in traditional school settings, linking work and education together has proven a powerful motivator and an effective teaching tool.[5] We believe, then, that the relevant question for local policy makers and administrators should not be how the public schools have failed in teaching disadvantaged youth, but rather how JTPA and the local schools, colleges and community organizations can work together to provide the enriched learning experience these young people need to succeed.

Youth Have Different Needs From Adults. There are also several themes that run through this guide and shape its approach. The first, implicit in the title, is that young people and adults are different -- they have different needs, different interests, and different learning styles. Effective basic skills programming for youth must take those differences into account. Too often, communities mainstream youth into adult programs without regard for the unique characteristics of adolescents. It is true, there are occasionally benefits, and frequently practical reasons, for combining youth and adults in a single basic skills program. But, to achieve truly effective program design, we believe that SDAs should be developing more programs that are just for youth and are youth-centered in design.

Youth Also Have Diverse Needs. The second theme builds on the first. Not only are youth different from adults, but among youth there are significant differences in basic and work skills, social and psychological development, and the barriers they bring to the learning process. We need to acknowledge those differences as well. At the "systems" level -- the point at which an SDA determines its overall program mix -- the diversity among youth means we need to pursue a multi-faceted youth strategy: one

[5] Andrew Hahn and Robert Lerman, What Works in Youth Employment Policy (1985)

that includes an array of program models targeted to meet different needs. At the program level, we also need to take into account the differences among younger and older, less and more skilled, in-school and out-of-school youth. These are critical considerations in program design, and they affect instructional strategies, the degree of counseling and support needed, and the ways in which learning is tied to work.

The simple message is that one size does not fit all. While a tool, such as a computer, may be used in a variety of basic skills programs, how it is used and the services it is combined with will vary significantly according to the population to be served and the program goals.

JTPA Can Support Basic Skills. The third theme is that, while it may not be easy (and good programming seldom is), effective basic skills education can be delivered under JTPA. Through well-thought-out program design, a commitment to collaboration with local schools and colleges, and pursuit of the wide range of options available for addressing financing and performance standards issues, SDAs can operate programs that build basic skills and result in improved performance.

In the following pages, we attempt to translate these themes into practical information that administrators and planners can use in defining their approach to basic skills services. But, there are limits to the advice we offer. We have not tried to create an encyclopedia on basic skills education, nor have we developed a nuts and bolts, step-by-step cookbook to program operations. This guide does not provide simple models for replication or lists of rules that will guarantee good results -- there are no magic bullets in this field. Basic skills education is a complex task, and it is in the nature of that task that there is no one curriculum package that will do it all, there is no program model that works for all kinds of kids, there are no shortcuts to careful planning, and there is no substitute for a caring and committed staff. That is why this guide can only be a start. Its goal is to provide a road map that points readers in the direction of what works, what doesn't and why. The commitment and creativity needed to make basic skills programming truly successful doesn't come in a book -- it rests with you.

BASIC SKILLS AND DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

A recent review of the dropout problem in America began with the reminder that "no single approach or strategy will prove effective for all children and adolescents in difficulty."

> What works for a pregnant dropout or teenage mother may not meet the needs of an adolescent who leaves school to take a job. Similarly, a youngster ... who has performed fairly well in school but whose family life is in disarray may require different support and guidance than [another] who has fallen far behind his grade level.... Youngsters in trouble in school and at the workplace do not constitute an undifferentiated mass. Therefore, efforts to intervene on their behalf must respond to their distinct and varied needs.[1]

The comment provides an appropriate starting place for a discussion of basic skills programming. Young people who need to improve their basic skills represent a large and diverse population. Within JTPA's definition of "youth" we find children just entering adolescence and twenty-one-year-olds who have been on their own for several years. Young people with basic skills problems can include youth who, though struggling, have managed to stay in school and others who, for reasons ranging from academic failure to fears of personal safety, have dropped out. Most can read, write and compute to some degree, but a still too many are essentially illiterate. Among those who can read and write, many cannot do so well enough to succeed in training or employment, and their ability to apply their skills in every-day situations varies widely. Some have held or are holding jobs, while others have little sense of the rules and requirements of the workplace. Growing numbers are themselves parents, have problems of alcohol or drug abuse, or have come into contact with the courts. Many, if not most, have soured on formal education. Some have given up all commitment to their own learning.

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[1] Andrew Hahn, Jacqueline Dansberger, and Bernard Lefkowitz, Dropouts in America: Enough is Known for Action. (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, March, 1987).

Effective basic skills education starts with the recognition of the needs and characteristics of a community's youth. The extent of the basic skills problems, the age and maturity, and the special barriers to participation faced by a community's youth define the needs that communities must plan to meet. Whether or not the youth being served are still in school, how well they can already read or write, their age, work experience, their need for counseling, day care or other services are critical determinants of program design -- they set the kinds of outcomes that are appropriate, the instructional strategies likely to work, and the kind of support that students will need if they are to invest in their own education. Lastly, differences within a community's population of young people determine the degree to which a variety of program strategies have to be available within an SDA and the institutional players who need to be involved.

This chapter attempts to define some of the key factors that JTPA administrators need to take into account in developing basic skills programs and in defining an appropriate program mix. As we have talked with practitioners, three questions stand out as particularly useful in determining the kinds of programs and services that a community's young people are likely to need:[2]

- **How much do they need to learn?** What level of skills do they have, and what outcomes are appropriate to pursue?
- **How mature are they?** To what extent are they self-directed and goal-oriented? To what degree are they oriented to the labor market?
- **How much support do they need?** What special emotional or social barriers do they bring to participation? What special needs do they have; how intensively will they need to be encouraged and assisted?

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[2] Rene Lerche's Effective Adult Literacy Programs, in a discussion of adult literacy programming, presents a similar list of five variables to consider: (1) life and employment goals; (2) educational background, including current skills, prior knowledge, and linguistic ability; (3) life experiences and cultural background; (4) personal preferences and interests; (5) learning styles or special learning problems. See Effective Adult Literacy Programs: A Practitioner's Guide (New York: Cambridge Book Company, 1985), 102.

Defining Basic Skills: What Skills Do Employers Demand?

What are "basic skills?" Traditionally, basic skills has meant the ability to read, write and compute well enough to function in daily life. But the concept of basic skills is a constantly moving target, one that has grown to encompass more than the three Rs. As the information-processing demands of most occupations have grown, the term "basic skills" has evolved to include higher-level thinking skills, the capacity to learn new tasks, and the ability to solve increasingly complex problems. Writing in 1985, for example, the Committee on Economic Development (CED) noted that "mastery of the old basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic may be sufficient for entry-level jobs, but because of the constantly changing nature of work, minimum skills are not sufficient preparation for career advancement. Schools must make a greater effort to develop higher-level skills, such as problem solving, reasoning, and learning ability." Another study, High Schools and the Changing Workplace: The Employers' View (1984), sounded a similar theme, noting that young people entering the workforce today need "the ability to learn and to adapt to changes in the workplace.... The ability to learn will be the essential hallmark of the successful employee."[3]

In the field of youth employment, basic skills are also closely associated with more general work maturity and life skills as essential elements of employability. Nearly ten years ago, employers surveyed by the Vice President's Task Force on Youth Employment reported that they wanted workers who not only could read and write, but who were punctual, could follow instructions, and would act responsibly on the job. The CED's survey of employers in 1983-84 indicated that those employment requirements still stand. They found that "specific occupational skills are less crucial for entry-level employment than a generally high level of literacy, responsible attitudes

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[3] Committee for Economic Development, Investing in Our Children (New York, 1985), 16. The National Academy of Sciences report, High School and the Changing Workplace, went on to describe a series of "core competencies" based on its study of employer views. They were: command of English; capacity to reason and solve problems; ability to read, comprehend and interpret written materials; ability to write skillfully; ability to understand and apply basic mathematics; skills required to feel comfortable with technology; ability to communicate orally; ability to deal constructively and effectively with others; understanding of the economic structure of the community and country; realistic, positive personal work habits and attitudes.

The most recent report, a 1988 study by the American Society for Training & Development, Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want (Washington, D.C.: ASTD and U.S. Department of Labor), continues these themes. That study also notes that employers want employees who have "learned how to learn," and identifies seven key workplace skill groups: learning to learn; 3 R's (reading, writing, computation); communication; creative thinking/problem solving; self-esteem/goal setting-motivation/personal & career development; interpersonal/negotiation/teamwork skills; and organizational effectiveness and leadership.

toward work, the ability to communicate well, and the ability to continue to learn." More specifically, the CED noted that, "for entry-level positions, employers are looking for young people who demonstrate a set of attitudes, abilities, and behaviors associated with a sense of responsibility, self-discipline, pride, teamwork, and enthusiasm."[4]

Basic Skills Must be Locally Defined. In the end, the definition of "basic skills" beyond the core of reading, writing and 'rithmetic, depends on who you ask and when. There is no universal checklist of what basic skills young people require to become employable or succeed in school, though there is growing consensus on inclusion of such skills as the ability to solve multi-step problems and learn from complex materials. Instead, the decisions about which skills and what level of skills are important to teach are essentially local ones that need to be decided through a community's planning process.[5]

What is clear, however, is that the definition of what is meant by "basic skills" is the first essential element in the development of any basic skills program. It is through that process that communities identify what the basic skills requirements of the local labor market really are, and in doing so, define the skills that young people need to learn.

Setting Program Goals for In-School and Out-of-School Youth

While the definition of "basic skills" points to the kinds of skills that young people need to learn, a second set of critical elements in program design is the needs and goals of the youth being served. Though all basic skills programs aim at increasing long-term employability, in-school youth and out-of-school youth often present very different sets of needs and goals. Basic skills programs need to recognize that different goals are appropriate for different youth, and that programs for in-school and out-of-school youth may involve distinct strategies and designs.

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[4] CED, Investing in Our Children, 17.

[5] See Lori Strumpf's monograph Work and Education: Designing Basic Skills Remediation Programs for Youth (Washington, D.C.: Center for Remediation Design, 1987) for a discussion of a model local planning process for the design of basic skills programs.

The Goal for In-School Youth: Dropout Prevention. For in-school youth, the primary goal of basic skills remediation is dropout prevention. As a number of studies have demonstrated, poor basic skills, reading behind grade level, or being held back a grade are all strongly associated with the likelihood that a student will drop out. According to a study by Andrew Sum, "16-17 year olds with basic skills test scores in the bottom 20 percent of the test score distribution were 14 times more likely than those in the upper 20 percent to not be enrolled in school" two years later. Conversely, Sum found that a majority (50.3%) of all school dropouts aged 16-17 had basic skills in the bottom 20% of the test distribution. Nearly 75% of the dropouts were in the bottom 40%.[6]

Remediation and Prevention. Basic skills education can improve school retention for in-school youth in two major ways. The first is to provide remediation for those youth who are already behind and at risk of dropping out. It is estimated that one third of the nation's high school students are behind modal grade by one year, and another five percent by two years or more. For these young people, basic skills remediation might be combined with career education, work experience, and counseling through workskills programs, alternative schools or other comprehensive programs designed to both build basic skills and prepare youth for eventual employment.

The second role for basic skills education for in-school youth is the prevention of further learning loss. A growing body of literature suggests that as much as 80 percent of the difference in year-to-year learning between advantaged and disadvantaged youth is the result of a decline in basic skills suffered by disadvantaged students during the summer. As the STEP program has begun to demonstrate, basic skills classes provided in conjunction with summer jobs can stem learning loss and, in some cases, lead to actual gains in math and reading skills.[7]

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[6] Andrew Sum, "Basic Skills of America's Teens and Young Adults: Findings of the 1980 National ASVAB Testing and Their Implications for Education, Employment and Training Policies and Programs," (Boston: Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, July, 1986); also see Gordon Berlin and Andrew Sum, Toward a More Perfect Union: Basic Skills, Poor Families, and Our Economic Future, (New York: Ford Foundation, 1988); Andrew Hahn, Dropouts in America; and Margaret Terry Orr, What to do About Youth Dropouts, (New York: Structured Employment/Economic Development Corporation (SEEDCO), 1987).

[7] In its first three years at five demonstration sites, the Summer Training and Education Program (STEP) funded by the Department of Labor, Ford Foundation and managed by P/PV found that students receiving basic education services suffered significantly smaller learning losses than a control group, and in a few cases showed increases in test scores. In the process, the project also confirmed that learning loss does actually take place among JTPA youth, and can

Employability: The Goal for Out-of-School Youth. For out-of-school youth, there is a broader range of appropriate goals for basic skills education. For some dropouts, particularly younger ones, alternative school and GED programs can provide an important credential. According to the High School and Beyond survey, half of the dropouts studied had reentered school or were in GED classes within four years, and thirty-eight percent of all dropouts eventually returned and graduated or obtained a GED.[8] For other out-of-school youth, including those with diplomas but inadequate skills, the primary goal is employability. For some of these youth, this may mean substantial remediation, while others may only need help in developing the specific competencies needed to enter training or to gain a job.

Whether serving out-of-school or in-school youth, however, the question of who is being served is a critical element in program planning. The population to be served, and the goals appropriate for those youth (return to school, preventing learning loss, near-term employability, etc.) are a second set of factors that need to shape the program design and the specific skills that need to be taught.

Levels of Basic Skills Need

A third essential consideration for program design, for programs serving in-school or out-of-school youth, is the skill level of the participating youth. As the recent national surveys of basic skills have made clear, American youth vary substantially in the levels of basic skills that they possess. These differences in skill levels require different approaches to basic skills instruction. Consequently, the question of who is being served needs to be considered not only in terms of appropriate program goals for in-school and out-of-school youth, but also to insure that the teaching style and the content of the basic skills program matches the learning needs of the students.

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be on the scale of from 3/4 to a full grade equivalent in reading, and 1/2 grade equivalent in math. See Cynthia L. Sipe, Jean Baldwin Grossman, and Julita A. Milliner, Summer Training and Education Program: Report on the 1986 Experience and Summer Training and Education Program (STEP): Report on the 1987 Experience (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1987 and 1988). The issue of summer learning loss was the driving force behind the 1986 JTPA amendments which required assessment of all participants and provision of educational services.

[8] Orr, What to Do About Youth Dropouts, 9.

Three Levels of Skill. When discussing reading -- and by extension the other basic skills -- many educators divide the population into three groups: those with skills below the fourth grade level, those reading at a 5th through 7th grade level, and individuals who can read at the 8th grade or above. While educators and employment practitioners are increasingly dissatisfied with grade level as a measure of ability, those common benchmarks can help practitioners divide the youth population into segments that reflect the need for different types of program designs.[9] In general, the fourth grade reading level marks the transition from the process of learning to read to one of reading to learn. Below the fourth grade level, students lack the basic decoding skills needed to read printed materials; above that point they are able to work more independently and can read well enough to locate information, combine ideas and make inferences from relatively simple materials. A similar shift occurs around the 8th grade level, as students are able to deal with longer and more difficult materials. An 8th grade reading level is often considered the minimum standard for functional literacy, though, again, there is some disagreement about what skills are "functional" in today's hi-tech society. On a more pragmatic level, an 8th grade reading level is also the common dividing line between young people ready to pursue their GED or enter skills training and those who need additional, preparatory basic skills instruction.

Most Youth Show a Moderate Level of Skills. Within the general youth population, the vast majority of young people fall within the upper two groups, though there are still significant numbers of non-readers. Among 18 to 23 year olds tested in a national survey for the Department of Defense in 1980, 4.8% read at a fourth grade level or below. 23.5% tested at a 5th through 7th grade level, and nearly three quarters (71.7%) read at the 8th grade level or above.[10]

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[9] Grade level measures compare an individual's skills to the average skill of a school child in that grade. That is, a fourth grade reading level represents the level at which most fourth graders read. For employment and training practitioners there are two problems with this approach. First, it may not make sense to compare the skills of an adult living and working independently with those of a child. Second, grade levels are not particularly informative about the skills that a person has: can he or she read and use a bus schedule, figure change, and the like? Consequently, many researchers and practitioners are moving toward what are known as criterion-referenced measures, which indicate an individual's ability to accomplish a specific task.

[10] Thomas Sticht, "Functional Context Education: Workshop Resource Notebook," (San Diego: Applied Behavioral & Cognitive Sciences, Inc., March, 1987), 1.2.

The National Assessment of Education Progress study of young adults 21 through 25 years old found similar results. NAEP tested young people in three functional areas: prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy and found that "the overwhelming majority of young adults adequately perform tasks at the lower levels on each of the three scales..." However, it went on to note that while many youth were lacking in higher-level skills, "sizeable numbers appear unable to do well on tasks of moderate complexity. Only a relatively small percentage of this group is estimated to perform at levels typified by the more complex and challenging tasks."[11]

A similar pattern of skills has been found among in-school youth. NAEP's Reading Report Card indicated that while virtually all the 17 year old high school students tested were able to read at a rudimentary level, many evidenced difficulty with more complex reading tasks. Approximately 1.4% of the students were unable to read at a basic level, which required basic comprehension skills and the ability to locate and identify facts from simple stories or paragraphs. Another 15% read at between a basic and intermediate level, which required the ability to locate and organize information in relatively lengthy passages and to make inferences and reach generalizations about main ideas. The vast majority of students were able to read at the intermediate level or above, though the proportions reading at higher levels dropped rapidly. Approximately 60% were unable to understand complicated literary and informational passages, including material on topics they studied at school, and less than 5% were able to demonstrate the advanced skills needed to synthesize and learn from complex and specialized texts, including materials similar to those found in professional and technical working environments.[12]

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[11] NAEP defined prose literacy as the ability to understand and use information from texts such as editorials, news stories, and poems. Document literacy is the ability to locate and use information from documents such as job applications, bus schedules, maps, tables, etc. Quantitative literacy is the knowledge and skills required to apply arithmetic operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division either alone or sequentially, as balancing a checkbook, figuring a tip or determining the interest rate in a loan advertisement. When the NAEP translated its findings into approximate grade levels, it found that overall, 6% of the young people tested could read at a fourth grade level or below, 14.2% read at between a 5th and 8th grade level, and 79.8% read at the 8th grade level or above. Two percent of the young people selected for the study, it is important to note, had such limited skills that they were unable to take the test. Roughly half of those youth reported being unable to speak English. See Irwin S. Kirsch and Ann Jungeblut, Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults, Princeton, NJ: National Assessment of Educational Progress, Educational Testing Service).

[12] The Reading Report Card: Progress Toward Excellence in Our Schools, Trends in Reading Over Four National Assessments, 1971-1984, (Princeton, NJ: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1985).

Greater Deficits Among Disadvantaged Groups. But the NAEP reports also make it clear that among minority youth, those living in disadvantaged urban areas, and dropouts -- populations heavily represented in youth employment programs -- more severe basic skills deficits are common, and higher proportions of youth demonstrate lower level skills. The NAEP study of 17 year old in-school youth, for example, found that 3-4% of the Black, Hispanic and urban students tested could not read at the basic level and roughly 30% read at only the basic to intermediate level. Both figures are twice those for 17 year-old in-school youth as a whole. The NAEP study of older, out-of-school youth also produced results indicating a much greater need for elementary basic skills education among at-risk groups than the population as a whole. Nearly 18% of the Black youth and well over 20% of the school dropouts read below a fourth grade level. Approximately half of the Black youth and high school dropouts (47%), and 63% of those with fewer than 8 years of education, read below the 8th grade level.

Need to Recognize Diversity. For JTPA practitioners, these figures carry two sets of meaning. The first and most common lies in their indication of the pervasiveness and magnitude of the basic skills problems among youth. As more and more studies have demonstrated, significant proportions of the population -- particularly those segments served by JTPA -- have difficulty performing the basic reading, writing and computational tasks needed to compete in the labor market. However, the figures also highlight a second point: the diversity of basic skill needs among young people and the importance of recognizing that diversity in planning and designing basic skills programs.

Maturity: Dealing with Youth as Youth

The differences in skill levels and learning needs among youth, both in-school and out, represent a critical dimension that practitioners need to take into account in planning and program design. Another set of issues relates to the interests and attitudes that youth, as youth, bring to the learning process. While young people differ widely in terms of the basic skills they possess, they also differ among themselves and, more importantly, from adults in their approach to learning. The maturity of the young

people being served -- that is, the extent to which they are emotionally independent, self-directed, and goal-oriented -- often determines the kinds of educational support they need.

Adult Learners. Much of the approach to adult education has been shaped by a series of assumptions about adult learners. In Malcolm Knowles' classic formulation:[13]

- A mature person is independent and self-directed, able to take responsibility for his or her own growth, and needing to have an active role in decisions about his or her education.
- Adults bring a reservoir of experience as workers, parents, and citizens. They learn best when teaching is based on that experience, using techniques such as group discussion, simulations, problem-solving projects and independent work that use that knowledge of daily roles and problems as a resource.
- The readiness of adults to learn is closely related to their need to know something in order to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives. Accordingly, practical content based on life performance is more appropriate and of higher interest than academic material.
- As a person matures, there is a growing orientation toward the immediate, rather than future, application of knowledge. Adults learn less for the sake of learning than to perform a task or solve a problem. Consequently, in contrast to the subject-centered, future-orientation of youth, adults are more immediate, task-oriented or problem-centered in learning.

Characteristics of Youth. Adolescent learners, however, bring a very different set of characteristics to the learning process. As adolescents, they are only in the midst of exploring and defining their own values, goals and identity. One moment they are trying out one or another aspect of what they perceive adults to be as they attempt to

[13] Drawn from Malcolm Knowles, The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species, (Houston: Gulf, 1978, 2nd edition).

build a mature picture of themselves. The next moment, they may resort to childish behavior because they have not yet broken free of the patterns of childhood or reached an adult level of functioning. They cannot be regarded as children -- many are already acquiring adult responsibilities -- but they are not yet adults. Though rapidly gaining the physical maturity, independence and mobility of adults, their life experience is still too short and too limited for them to have developed the motivation, responsibility and goal-directed behavior we can expect of a person who has reached adulthood.

A Time of Exploration. In occupational terms, adolescence is also a period of experimentation with choices and goals. The years from 16 to 25 have been characterized as a "moratorium" period by one writer, who describes it as a time of gradually increasing knowledge of the labor market, experimentation, frequent changes between jobs prior to settling down. Generally, younger adolescents -- 14 to 17 years old -- are least committed to or knowledgeable about the labor market and potential careers, while older youth are increasingly realistic about the need for training and education to reach specific goals. As a whole, however, young learners are less likely than adults to be certain of their future interests, consistently directed by a concrete career choice, or to be motivated by the need for specific, practical, and immediately applicable knowledge.[14]

What youth do bring is their own mix of characteristics, one that presents both challenges and opportunities for the learning process. Among them are:

- Low self-esteem coupled with a natural and deep desire to be accepted and do well.

- Negative attitudes toward classroom learning, a situation in which they have failed to succeed and often regard as unrelated to "real life". Those attitudes contrast with their readiness to accomplish

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[14] Paul Osterman, Getting Started: The Youth Labor Market (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980); Youth: Transition to Adulthood, Report of the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee (Office of Science and Technology, Exec. Office of the President, June, 1973); also see David Gottlieb, "Age Status Differentials and Intervention Strategies," and Robert Taggart, "The Youth Employment Problem: A Sequential and Developmental Perspective," both in The Vice President's Task Force on Youth Employment, A Review of Youth Employment Problems, Programs and Policies, (January, 1980) volume 1.

real work that represents success and which they and others can see and admire.

- Distrust of adults. At the same time, however, youth want to be accepted by an adult they can trust. Consequently, they are alert to and can be counted on to meet adult expectations, especially when such expectations are negative.

- Strong peer loyalty (with spurts of fickleness), which helps explain the lure of gangs and group anti-social behavior. On the other side of the coin, peer loyalty also helps account for the appeal and effectiveness of teamwork at this age. This age group often yearns to be part of something "bigger," by which they mean concepts or groups broader than self, friends and family. Work and learning by a team under strong adult leadership, consequently, instills a sense of pride in accomplishment greater than can be attained by a young person on his or her own.[15]

Program Design Must Reflect the Needs of Youth. All these characteristics point to the lesson that the focus and structure of basic skills education for adolescents must differ significantly from that for adults. Because youth lack the self-esteem and sense of accomplishment that accompanies independence and work, educational programs need to provide them with an opportunity to gain that sense of achievement and success. While adults, motivated by practical goals and immediate benefits, can direct their own progress and work relatively independently, youth are motivated more by and need the interest, direction and high expectations of supportive adults. For most youth, the desire to be part of a group means that shared activity with other youngsters can also act as a source of motivation. Retention of youth in a program, in fact, depends in large part on the development of peer attachments and loyalty to the team. Finally, while adult programs can draw on the experience of participants to enrich the learning process, basic skills programs for youth need to expand the limited experience of their participants -- ideally through ties to work -- so they can see the "real world" applicability of what they are learning. While there are variations within the youth

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[15] From "ABCs of Adolescence," one of a series of occassional papers published by the Smokey House Project, Danby, Vermont, 1987.

population -- 14 year olds will need more team work and support than 21 year olds -- the major lesson for program design is that youth are not like adults. Programs designed in accordance with the needs of adult learners will not work for kids.

The Need for Support

Beyond the normal adolescent needs, many youth with basic skills problems bring with them additional emotional and social problems that may demand an extraordinary level of support. These needs have to be addressed in the program design. Without appropriate support systems, basic skills programs are likely to be taken by surprise by problems ranging from poor attendance and high attrition to disruptive behavior among participants.

Failure and Self Esteem. While all adolescents experience low self-esteem, the issues of self-esteem and self-confidence are magnified tremendously for dropouts and other youth who have experienced failure in school. As one author, writing about the inner lives of disadvantaged youth, described it, these young people felt "a crisis of competence."

> The only thing they believe they are good at is consuming. They know how to buy sneakers, drugs, records. But so many of them don't believe they can do anything else.[16]

Studies of dropouts have confirmed and expanded this image, consistently showing that, regardless of actual ability, dropouts and students at risk have lower self-assessments, lower occupational aspirations, and more pronounced rebellious or delinquent behavior. According to one study, low achieving students, in contrast to middle-class youth or average achievers, do not believe that effort and achievement are linked. Another survey of the field notes that, among academically at-risk students and school-leavers, the lack of self-esteem manifests itself in an unwillingness to try things, social isolation, withdrawal from school-related activities, poor attendance and hostile behavior. Having failed once, further schooling, for many, seems simply like another

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[16] Bernard Lefkowitz, Tough Change: Growing Up On Your Own in America (New York: Free Press, 1987), 273

opportunity for failure. A New York practitioner interviewed for this guide put it simply when she said that as a result of prior failures, dropouts "have totally given up their commitment to their own learning."[17]

Multiple Barriers. For many youth, basic skills and emotional problems may be further complicated by teenage parenting, welfare dependency, unemployment, substance abuse, or involvement with the courts. According to research by Andrew Sum and Gordon Berlin on 18-23 year old youth, youth with poor basic skills are nine times more like to drop out of school, eight times more likely to become unwed mothers, and four times more likely to become welfare dependent than youth with above average skills. Other studies have suggested that dropouts are higher than average in early drinking, drug use and delinquency, and that for substantial numbers, dropping out is associated with family problems ranging from parental divorce to physical and sexual abuse.[18]

For these youth, and those with severe problems of self-esteem, basic skills deficits represent only one problem among the many that bring distress to the youngster's daily life. Getting up and out to class while coping with a small child, balancing school and family responsibilities, or trying to attend school while holding a job are challenges that can undermine the determination of even the most mature adult. Without additional family and psychological counseling, ready access to day care, assistance with welfare, and intense, daily support that may initially include wake-up calls and transportation, few youth facing multiple barriers will attend a basic skills program on a regular basis or persist long enough to succeed.

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[17] Kay Hupp Sardo, "Guidelines for Jobstart's Educational Component," (Prepared for the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, April, 1985), 3; Nancy F. Conklin and Janise Hurtig, Making the Connection: A Report for Literacy Volunteers Working with Out-of-School Youth, (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Laboratory, Revised Edition, 1986), 24-25; also James M. Weber and Cindy Silvani-Lacey, Building Basic Skills: The Dropout, (Columbus, OH: National Center for Research in Vocational Education, Ohio State University, 1985).

[18] Berlin and Sum, Toward a More Perfect Union, 24-38; and Conklin and Hurtig, Making the Connection, 19-29.

A Basic Skills System: Beginning with the Youth At Risk

For practitioners, differences in goals, variations in skill levels, adolescent learning styles, and the need for extraordinary support services all point to the fact that program planning and design has to begin not with a computer or a curriculum, but with the definition of the needs of the young people being served. Those needs affect what a program needs to teach, how it needs to teach it, and to what extent the program design needs to extend beyond basic curriculum and instruction. The programs that fail to address those needs are those most likely to have problems retaining their participants and achieving necessary learning gains.

Communities Need an Array of Strategies. The differences among youth, in terms of skills, maturity and need for support, also point to the need for a community to develop and offer a variety of program strategies. The instructional strategy, the use of group activities, or the extent of supportive services that works for relatively skilled, older youth will not work in a program that is serving young parents or low level readers. As the sections that follow suggest, while there are key elements that should be in every basic skills program, it is the tailoring of program design to the group being served that spells success.

At the "systems" level, the diversity of youth also means that administrators need to begin to think systematically about the mix of basic skills programs and services their SDAs offer. Rather than contracting for a GED class here and a learning center there, or treating basic skills as a single, generic program activity, SDAs and PICs need to look carefully at the match between the programs they fund, the populations they are serving, and the kinds of basic skills needs that have to be addressed. While there is no one mix that suits every community, we believe that, to provide effective basic skills education, communities need to develop an array of programs. Using approaches that might range from work crews to alternative schools to a combination of job search and GED preparation, communities can then begin to address the different skill levels and needs among the various segments of the youth population.[19]

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[19] The Center for Human Resources' report for the Department of Labor, Region V, Youth Performance Management Task Force includes a discussion of local system design strategies. See "Working It Out: An Anthology of State and Local Performance Management Strategies Designed to Increase Services to Youth At Risk of Chronic Unemployment (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, February, 1989), 2 volumes. An abridged version of the

KEY QUESTIONS: BASIC SKILLS AND DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

Communities developing basic skills programs need to think carefully about who they are serving and what needs they plan to address. Among the questions they need to ask are:

- What basic skills do young people in your community need to be employable? What specific reading skills, computation skills, writing skills, etc. do they need to demonstrate for long term success in the labor market?

- Who are you planning to serve? Are they younger or older youth? In-school or out-of-school? How well do they read, write and compute? What special barriers do they bring, such as drug or alcohol abuse, child care needs, etc.?

- What are the goals of your program(s)? Dropout prevention, prevention of learning loss, GED preparation, employability development, immediate preparation for training, etc.?

ARE THE PROGRAM GOALS APPROPRIATE FOR THE POPULATION YOU ARE SERVING?

IS THE PROGRAM DESIGN APPROPRIATE FOR YOUR POPULATION AND YOUR GOALS?

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report is available from the Center for Human Resources as a special issue of its newsletter Youth Programs.

"When I first came here, I thought it was going to be like the regular school. I thought the whole class was going to do the same assignment and get homework. But I was wrong. Instead we had our own assignments that suited our own capabilities. I found it to be more successful than regular school. The staff was absolutely delightful. They were always there when any of the students had a problem. The learning center is like a family to me, and I will never forget it." [NY PIC Learning Center Student]

BASIC SKILLS PROGRAMMING

To successfully meet the needs of disadvantaged youth, basic skills programs have to accomplish several goals. They have to be able to teach youngsters who have a wide range of learning needs and who failed to learn in school. They have to provide the motivation and support that students need if they are to stay in the program long enough to learn. And they have to make a clear connection between basic skills and "the real world" to insure that young people see the relevance of what they learn and that they are learning the skills that they need to eventually gain and hold a job.

While program designs differ from place to place, there is a growing consensus among practitioners and researchers on the characteristics that are at the core of effective basic skills remediation. Based on the experiences of the Job Corps, research into alternative schools, and studies of other educational initiatives, those characteristics can be grouped into four broad themes:

- Provide an intense learning experience -- one that is individualized, self-paced and competency-based;
- Link work and learning -- through the use of functional materials, links to work experience, or worksite education;
- Offer regular reinforcement -- through curriculum design, incentives and recognition, and opportunities for caring relationships with peers and staff; and
- Create a supportive environment -- including open entry/open exit programming, counseling, a comfortable setting, and assistance in addressing problems such as day care and transportation.

The sections that follow talk about each of these characteristics and the issues involved in implementing them in a basic skills program.

AN INTENSE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

When educators talk about "an intense learning experience," they are talking about two things: the quantity of instruction and its quality. An intense learning experience is one in which a student's time in the program is concentrated on learning and practicing the skills he or she needs to develop (quantity). It is also one in which instruction is focused on each student's individual learning needs and is structured to constantly monitor and reinforce the learning process (quality).

The Prescription for Intensity: Research Background

The prescription for intensity comes from several sources. According to a large body of research, two of the key factors determining the effectiveness of basic skills education are, first, the degree to which instruction is individualized and responsive to a youth's learning needs, and, second, the time that is actually spent on learning. Research on what is known as mastery learning has shown, for example, that instruction that allows students to work at their own pace, provides frequent feedback to identify problems and progress, and includes supplementary instruction to correct difficulties on an ongoing basis can reduce the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students and, as a result, enable every student to attain a relatively high level of skills. According to one report, when instruction is individualized and learning is organized in a series of small, sequential units that students must master before proceeding, four-fifths of the students will attain skill levels that only one-fifth would achieve through traditional classroom instruction.[1]

Similarly, research has shown that "time on task" -- that is, the time a student spends actually working on the skills he or she needs -- is a major element in how fast a student learns. In traditional school settings, students spend relatively little time actually engaged in instruction. Some studies estimate that as little as 30% of the average school day is devoted to learning -- the rest is spent going back and forth to classes, going over daily assignments, or in extra-curricular activities. Other studies

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[1] Gordon Berlin and Joanne Duhl's paper, "Education, Equity and Economic Excellence: The Critical Role of Second Chance Basic Skills and Job Training Programs," (Ford Foundation, August, 1984) provides a nice summary of much of the research literature. See pages 42-44 for the overview of mastery learning. The major work on mastery learning is Benjamin Bloom, Human Characteristics and School Learning (1976). For a recent technical discussion of mastery learning research, see Daniel U. Levine and Associates, Improving Student Achievement Through Mastery Learning (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985).

have shown, for example, that workers on most jobs (including blue collar occupations) spend more time reading every day (about 155 minutes) than do high school students (98 minutes). In short, the time spent learning and practicing basic skills in school is relatively small. Yet the learning research is clear: students learn by doing -- by reading, solving math problems, and by writing. The greater the engaged learning time for the individual student, the greater the gains. As one article summarized, "important as a supportive classroom atmosphere or variations in text content may be, instructional time on task accounts for the greatest impact."[2]

The Lessons on Learning. What the educational research suggests, then, is that students learn best when:

- their time in a program is spent actually working on what they need to learn,
- they work at their own pace, and
- the instruction responds to their individual strengths and weaknesses.

What is important is not the time a youth is enrolled in a program, but the time that young person spends engaged in learning.

Intensity: A Pragmatic Prescription

The prescription for intensity, however, is more than an abstract research ideal. It also grows out of the practical concerns faced by program administrators. On a pragmatic level, every basic skills program is driven by the need for students to gain new skills as quickly as possible. Practitioners know that longer training periods are generally associated with higher rates of attrition. The longer it takes students to gain the skills they need, the more likely they will become discouraged or overwhelmed by growing problems of financial support, child care and the like. By speeding up the learning process, an intense program makes it less likely the student will drop out.

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[2] The 30% figure is cited in Berlin and Duhl, "Education, Equity and Economic Excellence," 44. Other time on task findings are discussed in Lois-Ellin Datta, "Employment-Related Basic Skills," in Harvey F. Silverman, ed., Education and Work, 81st Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (1982). Also see Larry Mikulecky, "The Mismatch Between School Training and Job Literacy Demands," The Vocational Guidance Quarterly, (December, 19891) 174-180.

Flexibility. Similarly, basic skills programs have to have the flexibility to meet a wide range of individual learning needs. Even after grouping into broad categories of skill (0 through 4th grade, 5th through 7th, etc.), individual students will differ in the specific skills they need to develop. Basic skills programs have to be able to identify the specific learning needs of individual students and develop an instructional plan that can directly address those needs.

A New Learning Experience. Finally, to succeed in attracting and motivating already disenchanted youth, basic skills programming has to provide an educational experience that is strikingly different from the one that students had in school. The central challenge of basic skills education is that of convincing young people who have not learned in traditional academic settings to re-invest in their own education. For most of these youngsters, school is synonymous with failure. They read, write and compute well below grade level. As a result, they have sat for years in classes working with materials they were unable to understand, ignored by teachers who were too busy to give them the attention they needed. To reach these young people, basic skills education has to offer something other than a return to seat time in a traditional classroom and the kinds of instruction that had not worked the first time around. It has to offer an approach that teaches young people what they want to know and can use, and it has to take place in an environment that makes students feel that they are important and that they can learn.

Intensity and Effective Programming. The prescription for intensity, then, doesn't only reflect the lessons of research. It also responds to the requirements of effective programming for at-risk youth. What we are calling "an intense learning experience" -- a high degree of time on task and a flexible, individualized mode of instruction -- provides the framework in which basic skills education can succeed on practical terms: providing as much education in as short a period as possible, providing instruction that can directly address the diverse needs of individual students, and doing so in a way that avoids repeating a student's prior experience with school.

Creating Intensity: Competency-Based, Individualized, Self-Paced Instruction
The practical application of intensity comes about in many ways, including combining work and learning, low student/teacher ratios, open-entry, open-exit programming -- all elements that are discussed later. But the starting point for an intense learning experience is the use of instruction that is competency-based, individualized, and self-paced.

What is Competency-Based Instruction? Competency-based instruction defines the learning process in terms of specific learning objectives or skills that a student needs to learn. Each student's progress measured by mastery of successive skills. In contrast to traditional classroom instruction, where the emphasis is on seat time and relative levels of performance (A,B,C or Good, Fair, Poor, for example), competency-based education emphasizes clearly defined and measurable learning outcomes -- what each student is able to do. Those outcomes may be defined in relatively familiar academic terms (the ability to add two numbers correctly or to read a passage and identify a key idea) or in functional, work-related terms (the ability to prepare an invoice or read an instruction manual and follow the directions). However, in both cases, what sets competency-based education apart from traditional academic instruction is the clear statement of the specific skills to be learned and the emphasis on competency -- the ability to perform a task successfully -- as the measure of achievement.

Competency and Intensity. Competency-based education provides several essential elements of intensity. First, by structuring learning in terms of a series of clearly defined competencies and component skills, competency-based education breaks the learning process into sequence of small, easily digested chunks. In doing so, it provides frequent opportunities for feedback and correction, thus insuring that students never get too far off track. Moreover, by breaking lessons into small units, competency-based instruction allows students to quickly gain a sense of achievement and success. For young people who have struggled for years in school, the ability to experience success in learning is a new and exciting experience, one that not only reinforces learning, but also provides a real motivation to continue the learning process. Similarly, competency-based learning provides students with a clear set of learning goals -- they can see the

competencies they have to learn, and they know what they have to do if they are to progress. In both instances, competency-based instruction helps make learning real and concrete. As a result, students are able to make the connection between effort and achievement, see the relevancy of their efforts, and begin to rebuild confidence in their ability to learn.

Learning Step by Step. Competency-based education also creates a sequential learning process. Generally, learning takes place in a step by step process, with each lesson or skill building on what you have learned previously. If you skip a step or fail to master an early skill, it will limit your ability to master more advanced lessons. (Before you can do division, you need to be able to multiply and subtract.) For many youngsters, it was the failure to master those early skills that led to later problems keeping up in school. By providing a clear sequence of skills that need to be learned to achieve a particular competency, and by requiring students to demonstrate mastery of one skill before moving on to the next, competency-based education insures that students really are learning the required skills rather than simply passing through the course.

A Sense of Accomplishment. Finally, competency-based instruction offers students a positive view of achievement -- it emphasizes what they are able to accomplish rather than their ranking relative to others in the class. For students who have spent their lives at the bottom of the class and question their ability to learn, this opportunity to experience their own competence is a major source of motivation.

Individualized Instruction. Individualized instruction means that what each student studies is based on his or her particular learning needs. Individualization builds on the idea of competency-based learning by recognizing that every student begins learning at a different point: each brings a different set of competencies to the learning process, and each needs to gain a different set of specific skills. Even after grouping students according to broad levels of skill such as 0 through 4th grade, 5th through 7th, etc., some within each group may need more work on reading comprehension or decimals than others. One student may need extensive help on some basic concepts, while another merely needs to practice skills that have grown rusty. In individualized

learning, each student's study plan is based on that student's strengths and weaknesses. When combined with a competency-based curriculum, the result is an educational process that is extremely efficient since it focuses each student's efforts on mastery of only those competencies that the student most needs to develop.

Recognizing Different Learning Styles. Individualization also means tailoring instruction to the individual's learning style through one-on-one assistance and the use of a variety of materials and methods. In a traditional classroom, every student is taught the same way, gets the same assignments, and uses the same materials. But, again, every student learns differently. One might plow ahead through a standard reading text while another may only work at reading if offered materials that address immediate life issues or present career-related information. Some students may learn a lesson the first time, others may need to have the same ideas presented more than once using different materials. In an individualized program, instructors or tutors are available to work with students one-on-one to identify where the student may need extra help, to discover which materials work well or badly, to offer feedback, and to modify a student's assignments as needed -- in short to find the approach that works best for the student.

Self-Paced. Self-paced instruction, in which students work through lessons at their own rate, is the third element in intensity and provides a number of benefits. First, by allowing students to take as little or much time as they need to master a particular skill or lesson, self-paced instruction offers the flexibility that is needed for truly individualized, competency-based instruction. Self-paced instruction, when combined with competency-based, individualized curricula, also maximizes time on task. In a self-paced program, students can use their education time to work on their own lessons without having to wait for others to work through material that the student has already mastered.

The Advantages of Competency-Based, Individualized, Self-Paced Instruction

When you combine a competency-based curriculum, individualized instruction, and self-paced learning, the result is a flexible and efficient learning process that can meet a wide range of individual learning needs while offering the kind of focused educational

experience that is most effective for second chance learners. To summarize:

- Learning takes place quickly, with maximum time on task. Students can focus on their individual learning needs rather than those of the average student in a class. Since the focus is on learning outcomes rather than class time, students are able to quickly go over those areas that they are strong in and spend their time working on those skills that need improvement.

- Lessons are broken up into a series of small units based on specific skills and subskills, providing the step-by-step sequence, small, bite-sized chunks and frequent opportunities for corrective feedback that are necessary for students to master the skills they are being taught.
- Instruction is tailored to accommodate each student's learning style through the use of different materials and by allowing each student whatever time he or she needs to master the lessons.

- By focusing on specific objectives and skills, competency-based learning also provides students with clearly defined goals and with an opportunity to see and measure their own progress -- an important element in providing motivation for learning.

- Competency-based instruction also lets students compare themselves to their own abilities rather than class norms. For students who have spent years at the "bottom" of their classes, the emphasis on positive achievement rather than comparative position in the class reinforces learning.

- Lastly, because instruction is self-paced and individualized, program operators gain substantial flexibility. With students working relatively independently, administrators have the option of providing open-entry/open-exit learning and don't need to segregate slow and fast learners or fill a class with youth who are all at the same level of education.[3]

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[3] This section has benefitted greatly from Robert Taggart's summaries of the learning research in his various papers on the Comprehensive Competencies Program (CCP). See for example, "The Comprehensive Competencies Program: A New Way to Teach, A New Way to Learn," (Washington, D.C.: Remediation and Training Institute).

Assessment and Curriculum Management: Tools for Implementing Intensity

While competency-based, individualized, self-paced instruction is clearly the most effective approach for working with at-risk youth, it is also the most challenging to implement. It requires a well-defined set of competencies, a means of assessing individual learning needs, a process for developing individualized learning plans, access to a variety of instructional materials and teaching methods, and opportunities for one-to-one instruction. Two tools in particular stand out: a well-developed assessment system and a curriculum management system. In both cases, the key to implementation lies in finding a system that matches a program's goals generally, and that can then be added to or adjusted to meet a program's particular needs.

Assessment: Identifying Needs and Measuring Progress. Assessment is the process of determining a youth's strengths and learning deficits, of specifically defining goals, and of measuring and certifying progress using explicit and formal criteria. For any basic skills program to succeed, you need some way of determining what each student knows, what skills he or she needs to gain, and when he or she has learned a new skill.

An Ongoing Process. Assessment in this context goes well beyond the common use of standardized tests (such as the TABE or ABLE) to identify a learner's general level of skill (usually a grade level equivalent) or the pre- and post-tests conducted at the beginning and end of an activity. Rather it is an ongoing process that is used to provide an initial indication of skill levels (appraisal), to identify exactly which specific competencies a young person needs to gain (diagnosis), to monitor achievement of specific skills (benchmarking), and to certify accomplishment. Assessment frequently takes the form of standardized tests, but testing is not the only means of assessing basic skills. Initial screening at least can also be accomplished through checklist review of written documents such as application forms or performance reviews, depending on the skills to be measured. The key question for practitioners is whether each assessment tool is producing an appropriate level of information (for example, that a test designed for diagnosis is not being used for initial screening) and that the information produced is relevant and useful for the program.

Increasingly, as basic skills education becomes more competency-based, the trend

THE FOUR ASSESSMENT STEPS

Assessment is a multi-step process; it produces information on a participant which can be used for many program purposes. Each assessment step provides information on where a youth "fits" on the employability continuum and how far a youth has progressed toward employability.

The four assessment steps are:

1. Appraisal (Screening). This first step in the assessment process provides an immediate snapshot of an individual's current abilities. Although the information produced at this assessment level may lack specificity, an initial appraisal which identifies a youth's functioning level of basic skills and work skills assists program operators in deciding whether the next level of assessment -- diagnostics -- is necessary or whether the youth is ready for a set of program services which does not include basic skills remediation.

2. Individual Diagnostics. The more extensive assessment carried out in this step provides information on specific skills in which a youth is deficient. This information pinpoints exactly where the remediation process should begin. This step functions as the "pre-test." At this point, a fairly prescriptive employability development plan should be formulated.

3. Monitoring Progress (Benchmarking). This assessment step provides program operators with information on how well a youth is progressing in the program and indicates when specific goals are met for the purpose of program exit. For the participants, benchmarking progress serves to reinforce learning by focusing on accomplished goals and specific competencies mastered.

4. Certification Test. This test is designed to verify competency attainment. This step functions as the "post-test."

From Morris, Strumpf, and Curnan, "Using Basic Skills Testing...." p. 15-16.

is toward criterion referenced assessment. In contrast to norm referenced testing, which compares the performance of a student to that of a group (e.g. a typical 7th grade reading level), criterion referenced assessment measures a student's ability to perform specific skills. While the results of criterion referenced assessments are harder to summarize in easily recognized categories (such as grade level equivalents), they do translate more directly into clear statements about functional abilities and can be easily related to job requirements.[4]

Curriculum Management: Linking Assessment to Instruction. The second tool for implementing intensity is a curriculum guide -- that is, some means of connecting assessment results to specific lessons and materials that can be used in teaching. Since each youngster has a different mix of learning needs, instructors need to be able to mix and match materials in constructing an educational plan. A student might need half a dozen lessons on some math skills, but none on others, for example. The point of individualized learning is that the student should not be required to work through a whole textbook to take those few lessons. A curriculum guide, then, provides the connections, indicating which lessons need to be taken to develop each specific competency. In a fully individualized program, the guide also would provide alternatives and supplementary materials for those students who find the initial materials too difficult or inappropriate.

Systemization is Key to Success. The development of a competency-based, individualized assessment and instruction system -- tests and curriculum guide -- is beyond the means of most programs. To do so means identifying or developing hundreds of individual tests to assess and certify skills, and then reviewing masses of curriculum materials and cross-matching them with the tests so that they could say that for adding fractions, lesson 5 in workbook X should be assigned.

At the same time, for most competency-based, individualized programs,

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[4] For a fuller discussion of assessment strategies, see Robin Morris, Lori Strumpf, and Susan Curnan, "Using Basic Skills Testing to Improve the Effectiveness of Remediation in Employment and Training Programs for Youth," (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Employment Policy, Research Report Series, RR-88-05, May, 1988; and Susan P. Curnan and Gerard F. Fiala, "Assessing Employability for Results," (Washington, D.C.: National Governor's Association, Center for Policy Research and Analysis, March, 1986).

SELECTING APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

The following principles for selecting appropriate assessment approaches may be adapted to meet local needs:

Soundness and relevance to results. If the results cannot be acted on, it is a waste of time to get the tool.

Impact on the actual delivery of services. If the assessment tool's results will not help to determine client assignment to services in the time frame allotted, the tool shouldn't be used.

Cost in dollars, time and staff. Consider the costs of securing and scoring the material, the equipment or facilities necessary, the training or certification of staff to administer the tool, and the time commitments of both staff and clients.

Acceptance by both practitioner personnel and clients.

Staff development required, e.g. the training of multiple raters in test administration.

Compliance with federal and state regulations, i.e., to the extent that specific, demonstrated job-related assessment tools are used to make client assignment to services, the tools must be in compliance with established laws.

From Curnan and Fiala, "Assessing Employability for Results."

systemization of the assessment and curriculum assignment process is critical. If individualized instruction is to work, instructors must be free to spend most of their time teaching. Consequently, test-taking and the assignment of materials (curriculum guide) needs to be as efficient as possible, taking up relatively little instructor's time. If each teacher has to search out or review material for every youth in a program, the time for teaching will inevitably suffer. And in fact, practitioners often point to the time they have to invest in curriculum development as a key barrier to effective basic skills programming.

WHAT ARE CAI AND CMI?

Computer-Aided Instruction (CAI) is the use of computers as instructional tools. Computer-Aided Instruction software can include drill-and-practice programs, tutorials, simulations, and problem-solving exercises.

Computer-Managed Instruction (CMI) is the use of computers as support tools for instructors and administrators. CMI programs can be used to assess student capabilities and learning needs, prescribe materials and activities, monitor student progress both in terms of time on task and test results, manage the curriculum process for individual students, and provide reports on individual students or groups of students. In essence, CMI is a management information system: one that generally operates in conjunction with a system of computer-aided instruction, but that can also reference pencil and paper materials and other forms of instructional materials.

Computer-Aided Instruction: An Effective Teaching Tool

For many practitioners, Computer-Aided Instruction (CAI) and Computer-Managed Instruction (CMI) offer an increasingly attractive solution to the complexities of curriculum management while providing an effective instructional tool. Computer-aided instruction offers a high degree of flexibility, individualized learning, ongoing feedback, freedom from peer pressure, and the positive reinforcement of a non-judgmental, "eternally patient tutor." Computer-aided instruction also provides uniformity of instruction, a means of providing teaching on a wide range of topics efficiently and at low cost, increased time for teacher/student interaction since much of the daily instruction is provided through computers, and, through computer-based instructional management systems, automated individualized diagnosis and recordkeeping. Many practitioners have found computers to be inherently motivating, with students able to work for far longer periods of time on computers than on paper and pencil versions of the same lessons.

Equally important, a substantial body of research has shown computer-aided instruction to be an effective teaching tool when combined with other instruction. Studies for the Job Corps found grade gains for students using CAI nearly twice those

of students in the Job Corps regular program. Studies of computer use in schools have found that as little as 10 minutes a day of computer-aided instruction resulted in significantly greater gains than were found among students in traditional classrooms.[5]

The Limits of CAI. CAI, however, also has limitations that practitioners need to take into consideration as they plan their programs. As an instructional tool, computers are only as good as the software that is available, and software for teaching basic skills is often still rudimentary and of variable quality. While CAI has the potential for use in simulations and to teach problem-solving skills, most of the software available today focuses on drill and practice exercises. Moreover, much of the current software has been developed for use by young children in school. Consequently, while the skills taught (addition, multiplication, reading comprehension, for example) may be appropriate to older youth or dropouts, the graphics and literary content may not. Even where software is appropriate, administrators have to be prepared to review it in terms of quality and to be ready to supplement it with other materials. In short, computer software, like traditional materials, has to be screened and evaluated as part of a curriculum development process.

Some Skills Can't Be Taught on Computers. Computer-aided instruction also is not appropriate for every type of learning. As basic skills programs increase their focus on writing, problem-solving, communication and thinking skills, the need to supplement computer-based drill and practice software with group instruction and interaction grows. Many practitioners have also found computers of limited help in working with very low level readers, who need a high degree of individual attention. Computers can still be extremely valuable teaching tools in some of these contexts: for example, practitioners have had success in using standard word processing software in teaching writing, and at least one program -- IBM's PALS program -- is designed to work with individuals who are functionally illiterate. But, in most cases, the teaching of beginning reading or of

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[5] For information on CAI/CMI, see Education Turnkey Systems, Inc., "The Job Training Partnership Act and Computer Assisted Instruction," (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Employment Policy, 1988); Education Turnkey Systems, Inc., "Uses of Computers in Education," (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Employment Policy, Research Report Series, RR-85-07, April, 1985); and Barry Argento, Joan Cooper and Robert Schwartz, Using the Computer in Youth Training Programs (Salt Lake: Olympus Publishing Company, Lessons from Youth Programs, No. 10, 1982).

thinking and problem solving skills, and the development of solid communication skills in particular, require the use of instructional techniques in addition to individualized, computer-based instruction.[6]

Computers Can't Replace Teachers. Perhaps most important, CAI cannot function without teachers to direct the learning process and provide motivation and support. As is the case with pencil and paper-based programs, students need some variety in materials and activities: four hours of computer-based drill and practice can be as boring as four hours at a desk. They also need the guidance, encouragement, and additional explanation that only a teacher can provide. Without that staff support, CAI is far less likely to be successful. At least one study has found that when a teacher was not available to interact with students in a CAI program, both results and completion rates declined.[7]

Choices and Trade-Offs

For every practitioner, the implementation of intensity in a basic skills program involves decisions concerning a mix of program design issues, convenience, and cost.

- Is the emphasis of the program on skills that are most appropriate for individualized, competency-based learning, or is the focus on skills that are better taught through more traditional methods or in groups?

- Is the program large and the population diverse enough to warrant investing a formal assessment and curriculum management system? Or does it make more sense for the program to select just a few curricula for use, trading off a lower cost investment in systems for limited individualization.

- Is an investment in computer-aided instruction appropriate? Can the skills be learned through computer-based drill and

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[6] The PALS program (Principle of the Alphabet Literacy System), developed by IBM, uses a combination of computer and interactive videodisc technology to provide computer-based instruction for individuals who read at the 0-6th grade reading level.

[7] Argento, Cooper, and Schwartz, Using the Computer, 35.

> practice instruction, or can they be taught as well using paper and pencil? Is the program large enough, and can computers be located in one or more central sites to ensure regular use, or is instruction so dispersed among sites so as to make sharing of equipment and software impractical?

The answers to these questions will vary with local circumstances and resources. On the one hand, most schools now have computers, and many have formal computer learning labs -- youth employment practitioners need to consider ways of resource sharing. At the same time, it is also worth noting that while computer-aided instruction shows significant gains compared to traditional classrooms, few studies have compared computer-based learning to individualized instruction (tutoring) or small group learning. For small programs or programs serving a highly dispersed population, the use of the "high tech" option may not be the best alternative.

What every practitioner has to recognize, however, is that curriculum and assessment systems, computer-based or otherwise, represent only one set of tools to be used in the overall program design. And more often than not, they are tools that will need to be tailored to the needs of the particular youth being served. No packaged system and no computer software will meet all the learning needs of the youth being served. What the packages and computer learning systems provide is a starting point -- a foundation -- on which the instructors and administrators in a basic skills program can then build. They help practitioners avoid the worst tasks of assembling a basic collection of assessment tools and curriculum, but they do not eliminate the need to review the materials and lessons that are supplied, or the need to supplement both with additional materials from worksites, schools and the community. Nor, in the end, do they eliminate the need for a capable and committed instructional staff to give shape and meaning to the program.

SUMMARY: AN INTENSE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

To create an intense learning experience, instruction should be:

- Competency-based, providing a step-by-step sequence of clearly-defined learning objectives, frequent feedback, and mastery of each skill before moving on.
- Individualized, with instruction targeted to each student's learning needs and tailored to the student's learning style through the use of a variety of materials and instructional approaches.
- Self-paced, allowing each student to progress at his or her own rate, taking as little or as much time as needed to master a particular skill or lesson.

A competency-based, individualized, self-paced approach depends on:

- An ongoing assessment process that can identify a student's general level of skill (appraisal), pinpoint specific learning needs (diagnosis), monitor achievement (benchmarking), and certify accomplishment; and
- A curriculum management system that links assessment results (e.g. learning needs) to specific lessons and materials for instruction.

Computer-aided instruction (CAI) has proven to be an effective teaching tool for competency-based instruction, offering a high degree of flexibility, individualized learning, ongoing feedback, and positive reinforcement. However, to be effective, CAI must be supplemented with other kinds of instruction.

LINKING WORK AND LEARNING

The second major element in effective basic skills programming (and youth programming generally) is linking work and learning. Simply put, linking work and learning means helping young people make the connection between the basic skills that they are learning and their use in daily living and the workplace. Among youth employment and education programs, three broad strategies for making that connection stand out: a job link, which combines schooling with work experience or occupational training; functional context education, which integrates workplace materials and problems into the basic skills curriculum; and integrated worksite training, which teaches basic skills through the actual work performed on the job. Each strategy has its own strengths and weaknesses, and each may be more appropriate in some circumstances than others. But all three share the same fundamental goal -- to build relevance and "real world" experience into basic skills education as a means of motivating youth to learn and of improving the effectiveness of the learning process.

The Job Link: Work as Motivation and Reinforcement

Employment and education professionals have long recognized that work experience or job training can be powerful incentives for young people to learn. For many young people, the dream of a job is all that will bring them back to school, and a clear connection between learning and work (through a no school/no work policy, for example) is often a major factor in keeping them involved in an educational program. Conversely, at-risk youth often give up on learning or drop out because they do not see where education leads to -- they want to know how their schooling will help them in the real world.

The Benefits of Combining School and Work. As a result, one of the most common work and learning strategies simply adds occupational training or a part-time job to an educational program. In this context, work experience or training provides several kinds of reinforcement for school: it provides a financial incentive to stay in school in the form of wages; it provides a work context and rationale for learning; and it provides a positive learning experience outside of school. As one report noted, for at-risk youth a job "gives a sense of purpose to other activities such as basic educational

and occupational skill training. It helps provide a frame of reference, knowledge of labor markets, and occupational skills, and job expectations that are important." A job also offers an opportunity for young people to see how others use basic skills at work and to practice their newly acquired skills in a practical setting. Perhaps most important, real work for real pay also provides an important opportunity for young people to build their self esteem and to gain a sense of competence. As the guide to one work and learning program put it, "success in learning through direct experience under close supervision builds the young person's sense of responsibility, self-worth and self-reliance and thus will frequently result in improving his or her attitude toward and achievement in school."[1]

A Simple Connection. A job link is in many ways the easiest of the work and learning connections to put into place. The key implementation issues are those of finding, funding, and supervising quality part-time or summer worksites, and while those tasks are never simple, they are familiar ones for most youth employment practitioners. Similarly, though programs need to make a connection between student work and classroom activities -- through practice problems, group discussions, one-on-one tutoring or counseling, etc. -- a basic job link generally does not require major alterations to the academic curriculum or detailed coordination between specific work assignments and classroom exercises. The job itself is the curriculum.

Job Link Limitations. But, on its own, a job link offers only limited reinforcement for learning. Since the connection between classroom curriculum and work experience is not specific and direct, a job link strategy leaves it largely up to the student to make the connections between the skills required on the job and what is being taught at school. If that connection is not made, students may continue to find school less than relevant to the world of work. Equally important, a job link will only succeed as a motivational tool to the extent that both the job and the educational component offer

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[1] Quotes are from Youthwork, Inc., "Combining School and Work: Interim Lessons from Youthwork's Demonstration Projects," (July, 1981), ix; and Smokey House Project, "A Crew Leader's Work Manual," (Danby, VT: Smokey House Project and the Center for Human Resources, September, 1984), 4.

interesting and satisfying learning experiences. As the demonstration projects of the late 1970s and early 1980s found, the promise of a job could bring large numbers of young dropouts back to school, but programs combining school with jobs had only moderate success in retaining those youth in traditional classroom programs. Simply providing a part-time job to youth in school was not enough to improve retention or increase basic skills.[2] Quality worksites, good supervision, and alternative educational approaches are also required.

Teaching in a Functional Context: A Stronger Learning Process

While a job link strategy combining school and jobs focuses on work as an incentive and general source of reinforcement, a "functional context" approach takes the work and learning link an additional step by using work-related materials and problems (preferably in association with work experience or training) as a means of improving the quality of the educational process itself. In essence, the functional context approach begins with the premise that not only is work a source of motivation, but that many young people and adults learn more quickly and learn to use their skills more effectively when basic skills are taught using work-related tasks and materials.

Learning Relevant Skills. The "functional context" approach rests on two basic arguments. The first, as many of the national surveys and commission reports have suggested, is that the skills being taught in traditional academic basic skills programs do not translate well into the workplace. The NAEP study of young adults found, for example, that while most young people are able to read and write at a basic level, many are unable to perform even moderately complex tasks or solve problems that require them to process information and apply it to new situations. The young people tested were "literate" but unable to use their literacy to solve real world problems.

In part, the NAEP results reflects a low level of basic skills among many youth. But they also reflect the differences between the ways in which reading, math and other basic skills are taught in school and their uses in the workplace. According to

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[2] See Andrew Hahn and Robert Lerman, What Works in Youth Employment (Washington, D.C.: National Planning Association, 1985) for a description of the YEDPA demonstrations. The largest project, YIEPP, found that a job guarantee brought significant numbers of young people back to school. Of those who returned, however, the dropout rate remained high.

one set of studies, for example, most of the reading done by high school students is "reading to learn" or "reading for facts" using textbook materials; less than 2% is reading to accomplish tasks or to evaluate or assess information. The reading at the workplace is just the opposite: more than 80% is "reading to do" rather than "reading to learn," and it involves the use of a far wider range of materials -- manuals, flyers, diagrams, invoices, texts, printouts, contracts, etc. The traditional academic basic skills curriculum, in short, provides few opportunities for students to learn how basic skills will be used outside of school or to practice those skills on the kinds of problems and materials that they would confront outside the classroom. As a result of these differences between in-school and "out-of-school" learning, one educator recently wrote, "there is growing evidence ... that not only may schooling not contribute in a direct and obvious way to performance outside school, but also that knowledge acquired outside school is not always used to support in-school learning. Schooling is coming to look increasingly isolated from the rest of what we do."[3]

Learning Skills Better. At same time, a number of educators are suggesting that many youth and adults actually acquire basic skills more quickly and effectively when those skills are taught in a functional context with opportunity for hands-on practice. Thomas Sticht has argued, for example, based on his research in the military, that young people learn more quickly when basic skills education uses work-related documents and problems than when general literacy materials are used. Teaching basic skills in a functional context, Sticht argues, provides a "experiential base" -- an understanding of a task, or knowledge about "how the world works" -- that makes it easier for students to understand the abstract skills and processes being taught and to apply them to their own experience. By providing a sense of the whole through the use of real world tasks and settings, the parts (e.g. specific skills) are made more easily understood.

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[3] Thomas Sticht and Larry Mikulecky, Job Related Basic Skills: Cases and Conclusions (Columbus, Ohio: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education) National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1984) provides a brief review of the research; also see Thomas Sticht, Reading for Working; and Larry Mikulecky, "Job Literacy: The Relationship Between School Preparation and Workplace Actuality," Reading Research Quarterly, XVII, no. 3 (November, 1982). For a review by an educator of the research on this issue, see Lauren B. Resnick, "Learning In School and Out," Educational Researcher, (December, 1987) 13-20. Resnick also finds that there are sharp contrasts between the ways in which basic skills are taught in school and how they are applied in the workplace.

Work as a Teaching Tool. Other researchers have come to similar conclusions. In a recent review of the literature on in-school and workplace learning, Lauren Resnick noted that the programs that were most effective in teaching the thinking and learning skills required by employers were those that included elements of "out-of-school learning" -- that is, the kind of learning that takes place in the workplace. Three characteristics stood out among those programs: they all involved shared work and the joint accomplishment of tasks, so that the elements of the skills take on meaning in the context the whole; they all included the opportunity to build skills bit by bit based on observation and hands-on participation (as in apprenticeship); and the learning process in each was organized around particular bodies of knowledge or subjects rather than general abilities. In short, by making use of real world tasks, materials, and experience to clarify skills and provide opportunities for practice, the quality of the learning process was improved.[4]

Work in this context becomes another teaching tool in the basic skills instructional arsenal, providing an additional method of helping young people develop their skills. For at-risk youth, whose knowledge of the kinds of activities involved in working may be limited, the use of a functional context strategy can be particularly important. Not only does the use of work-related materials help maintain student interest by reinforcing the connections between education and jobs, but it helps in important ways to convey the skills being taught and to clarify their use outside the classroom. Though the research on the gains from functional context learning is still far from conclusive, as a whole it tends to confirm the common sense notion held by many practitioners: that many youth learn better by experience than through textbooks, and that the more learning strategies that are built into a program, the more the learning process is reinforced.

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[4] Thomas Sticht et al, Cast Off Youth: Policy and Training Methods from the Military Experience (New York: Praeger, 1987) and Sticht's "Functional Context Education: Workshop Resource Notebook" (Applied Behavioral & Cognitive Sciences, Inc., March, 1987) discuss the functional context approach to basic skills in depth. Thomas Sticht and Barbara A. McDonald's paper, "Making the Nation Smarter: The Intergenerational Transfer of Cognitive Ability," (Applied Behavioral & Cognitive Sciences, Inc., San Diego, CA, January, 1989) also provides a useful discussion of the literature on cognitive development. Also see Resnick, "Learning In School and Out" for another discussion of the characteristics of effective cognitive development strategies.

Three Functional Context Strategies

There are a number of strategies within the broad category of "functional context education" for building work tasks into the basic skills instructional process. The simplest and probably most common is through the use of work and daily living materials in the classroom to supplement more academically-oriented curriculum. Many basic skills programs make use of bus schedules, application forms, invoices, and the like for practice exercises, special simulation games, or group problems that involve work skills and materials. The strength of this approach -- like that of a job link -- is that it provides a basic work and learning connection without requiring the development of a full-scale customized curriculum and assessment system. Through a mix of a competency-based academic curriculum (such as provided by most computer-aided instruction packages) and well-designed work-related exercises, basic skills programs can begin to provide the "world knowledge" that young people need and to demonstrate the application of basic skills in a variety of work-related settings. By combining work-related problems in class with work experience or occupational training, and by reinforcing the work and learning connection through counseling or group discussions, an "ad hoc" functional connection can provide an important element of relevance and reinforcement.

Career Academies. A number of urban high schools have taken a more sophisticated approach to work and learning by establishing career-oriented "academies" that build a full-scale alternative school program around work-related materials and situations. Operating as schools-within-a-school or as separate alternative schools, the academy approach involves the development of a high school curriculum that uses the materials and tasks involved in a particular set of careers as the tools for instruction and motivation. Designed in cooperation with businesses in the career area, the academies combine their vocationally-oriented curriculum with internships, hands-on work experience, practice interviews and other kinds of exposure to work. The focus on a specific vocational area (there are academies for finance, health sciences, and business, for example) provides a more coherent, integrated approach to work and learning than an ad hoc use of functional materials to supplement an otherwise academic curriculum. At the same time, though career specific, the academy model stresses development of

underlying basic skills -- including reasoning and problem-solving skills -- rather than more narrowly defined "job-specific" basic skills. The academy approach is an effort, in short, to make use of careers as a focus, context, and motivational resource while developing a broad range of functional basic skills.[5]

Job-Specific Basic Skills. The most focused and highly structured approach to connecting work and learning is a job-specific strategy, in which a basic skills curriculum is designed to address the requirements of a specific set of jobs or training programs. A job-specific basic skills strategy identifies the particular basic skills required by a training program or a job and designs a curriculum, using materials and/or situations from that job, to teach those skills. An individual preparing to enter training as a machine operator, for example, would learn the specific reading and math skills needed to read the machine's instructions, to understand the machine's controls, and to program the equipment for the tasks that must be performed. The result is a program that is very intense -- every skill taught relates directly to one of the demands of the workplace -- and that offers an opportunity to acquire skills quickly for those seeking to move directly into work or training. At the same time, without a plan for longer-term education, job-specific basic skills training is open to criticism as a short-term solution. As jobs change, workers need to be able to adapt their skills to new situations. Job-specific skills training must, as a result, either build in a capacity for developing more generalized basic thinking and learning skills or provide for an ongoing process that will build those skills over the long term.[6]

Intensity and Implementation. Because they provide a more direct link between specific work demands and education, both the academy and the job-specific approaches are more intense than an "ad hoc" approach or a job link and are more likely to have a significant impact on the skills of the youth being served. However,

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[5] For a brief summary of the academy approach, see Academy for Educational Development, Partnerships for Learning: School Completion and Employment Preparation in the High School Academies (New York: AED, 1989).

[6] The major source on job specific functional context learning is the work of Thomas Sticht. See his Job-Related Basic Skills (with Larry Mikulecky); and Cast Off Youth: Policy and Training Methods from the Military Experience.

they also require substantially more work to implement. While an ad hoc approach can use existing basic skills curriculum as a base from which to work, the curriculum for academies and job-specific programs need to be developed specifically for the careers and jobs they are associated with. That process involves analyzing the job tasks (usually in association with employers in the field), identifying competencies, and developing assessment instruments, teaching and practice materials, etc. from scratch. While not necessarily beyond the means of local basic skills programs, the trade-offs between the benefits and the higher costs of a highly structured functional context strategy need to be considered in making program design choices.[7]

Worksite Training: An Integrated Approach

The third major work and learning strategy is integrated worksite learning, in which basic skills are taught, at least in part, through the tasks being performed at the workplace. In worksite learning, students work under close supervision (sometimes called "para-apprenticeship") at real jobs that provide the context for on-the-job basic skills education. As in apprenticeship, the work task and the underlying skills are taught together, with each task reinforcing a different set of skills. Young people working on weatherization projects, for example, might strengthen their reading skills as they study literature on the building materials needed for a project; math skills might be learned through calculations of square footage or materials costs; writing might be taught through the development of brochures and flyers advertising the work. Basic skills, in short, are not only taught in a functional context, they are "embedded" (in the words of one program) in the work experience itself.[8]

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[7] It is worth noting that competency-based, job-specific curriculum have been developed for vocational education programs, and the numbers of career academies and youth and adult learning programs using functional context curriculum are growing steadily. As a result, functional basic skills curriculum materials should be more readily available to local practitioners in the near future. One of the most important projects in this regard is the "Project of the States," a multi-state initiative aimed at designing and implementing functional basic skills assessment tools and curriculum for use by youth employment programs. The project is a joint effort of the Center for Remediation Design in Washington, D.C., the Center for Human Resources at Brandeis University in association with select state and local Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) entities.

[8] The "para-apprenticeship" analogy comes from the Smokey House Project, Crew Leader's Manual. For a description of another approach to worksite training, see Richard R. Benedict, Richard Snell, and Donald Miller, "Enterprise High: Helping School Dropouts Become Self-Supporting Adults," Educational Leadership, (March, 1987) 75-78.

The Benefits of an Integrated Approach. The benefits of worksite training lie in its integration of a functional context strategy, in which basic skills are taught and learned in the context of work materials and problems, with real work that is closely tied to the learning process. As with a job-specific approach, worksite learning is intense -- the connection between work and the skills being taught is clear and direct, and the time on the job is time on task. By using real work as a learning device, worksite learning also provides the motivational support inherent in a job -- young people are paid for their time at work, and they are able to see a concrete product from their efforts. Finally, in its emphasis on close supervision and its use of real work, a worksite learning approach also helps young people develop the broader work skills necessary to succeed on the labor market. As the description of one worksite program noted, "students learn to work together, learn that they can accomplish more together than alone, and develop a sense of community that also improves their social functioning outside" the program.[9]

The Limits of Worksite Training. As with the other strategies, however, worksite learning also has its limitations. Worksite learning's emphasis on "moment to moment" learning through intensive supervision means that the costs of that strategy are often high -- a ratio of one staff for every five participants is not uncommon. As with any effective functional context strategy, the curriculum must be closely tailored to the work being done, which means developing a customized approach. Finally, depending on the goals of the program, worksite learning may need to be supplemented with additional classroom teaching. Where the goal is to reinforce existing basic skills through the use of those skills at work, worksite learning on its own can have a significant impact. Worksite learning may be less successful as the primary means of teaching basic skills themselves because of the need to provide adequate time for basic skills instruction and practice and to ensure that a balance of general and specific skills are built into the curriculum.

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[9] Benedict, Snell, and Miller, "Enterprise High," 76.

Making Work and Learning Work: Some Common Themes

The job link, functional context, and worksite training strategies each have their own strengths and weaknesses. But several common themes run through them all. The first is that at least some exposure to real work needs to be built into every basic skills strategy. For younger students that exposure may take the form of job shadowing, volunteer work, summer jobs and/or part-time jobs. For older students, work experience may take the form of summer jobs, on-the-job training, and/or private sector (or private sector funded) work experience. What is clear, however, is that real work offers a unique set of benefits when combined with schooling -- increased self esteem, a sense of responsibility and achievement, and exposure to the requirements of the workplace. Those benefits make work experience an invaluable element in any basic skills program.

Make the Work and Learning Connection Clear. The second theme is that the impact of all of the work and learning strategies depends on making the connections between work and schooling clear and explicit. Any time a job link is made, a "no school/no work" policy has to be established and enforced; without it there is no way to leverage work as an incentive. Programs that link work experience and schooling, and particularly those that combine jobs with an "ad hoc" use of functional materials, also need to provide a means of connecting a student's work experience with the classroom and vice versa -- through group discussions, "life skills" activities, counseling, and most important, though regular meetings between teachers and worksite supervisors. In programs that rely on a more direct school and learning connection, such as job-specific skills or worksite training, employer and supervisor involvement in basic skills programming is even more important. For teachers and supervisors to make "moment to moment" connections between work and learning, they need to be aware on a daily basis of what skills are being taught in school and what tasks are being assigned at the workplace.

Quality Worksites. The third theme is the importance of a quality worksite and real supervision whenever real work is built into the program. While the jobs may be entry level (or even "dead end" -- most of us begin our work lives in short-term, dead end

jobs), the quality of the work experience should be high. Work needs to engage the young person and offer an opportunity for achievement, reinforcement, and new experiences if it is to help overcome the frustrations that young people often feel about schooling. To do that, a job must offer real work with real products (not make work) for fair pay. It must also provide young people with the sense that they are learning and with the perception of a future use for the skills that they are gaining. And it must also provide "concerned, caring supervision" -- supervision that mixes patient support with consistent discipline and high expectations. That relationship is key. As more than one report has observed, "the single most important ingredient for successful youth programs [is] good supervision."[10]

Collaboration. The final theme is collaboration. Work and learning is, by definition, a combination of two distinct and usually separate bodies of knowledge. It requires employment and education professionals and employers to bridge the gaps between their disciplines and to bring their experiences to bear on a common problem and the development of a common strategy -- not an easy task. In the words of one practitioner, "it is hard to make the connections between good work programs and education. Most practitioners don't know both sides -- they are either training people or educators. But you need both to make it work." The need for collaboration is evident on many levels. Employer involvement in curriculum design is one important area. But collaboration with employers is also essential in setting and enforcing "no school/no work" policies and in developing flexible work hours or part-time jobs for participating youth. Without that involvement from the beginning, programs are likely to have their credibility questioned and will constantly face an array of logistical and financial problems.

Collaboration is equally important among educators and employment professionals -- in developing curriculum, in arranging academic credits, in establishing communication channels between the school and the workplace, and so on. The local

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[10] Edward F. Dement, Results-Oriented Work Experience Programming, Lessons from Youth Programs, No. 8 (Salt Lake City: Olympus Publishing Co., 1983) 21. Also see Smokey House Project, Crew Leaders Manual. Lori Strumpf, in her monograph, Work and Education: Designing Basic Skills Remediation Programs for Youth (Washington, D.C: Center for Remediation Design, 1987), 49, identifies four characteristics of quality work experience. It must have: (1) work assignments that are real with pay for work; (2) work discipline so that missing work or coming late has consequences; (3) strong work supervision; and (4) understanding of work expectations and regular review.

high school may or may not be the most appropriate source of basic skills instruction, depending in large part on a school system's willingness to develop truly alternative instructional approaches. But the public education system still represents the largest youth serving institution in the country. As such, the involvement of local schools as referral sources, curriculum advisors and/or program operators is vital.

Work and Learning: Matching Strategies to Goals

The degree to which basic skills programs build work situations directly into the curriculum, and the specific approach taken will depend, in the end, on the goals of the program and local circumstances. Obviously, one critical factor affecting that decision is resources: are the people and the funds needed to develop an effective functional context or worksite curriculum available, or is a more limited approach -- a job link or a more ad hoc use of functional materials -- in order? More often than not, the resources are available, since successful programs generally start small and build over time. But the questions must be asked.

Different Options for Different Youth. However, the more critical questions to ask in building work into the basic education process are those concerning the needs of the youth being served and the skills that need to be gained. While each strategy can be adapted to meet a variety of needs, and several can be mixed and matched, no strategy makes sense in all situations. For younger students who are in-school, or for dropouts aiming at their GED or high school diploma, for example, a job link or an "ad hoc" use of functional materials may be the most appropriate approach: jobs and work-related materials are critical to provide motivation and a sense of how skills will be used, but within a broader academic context. The goal is to help those youngsters master a mix of academic and work skills. For older youth who have specific occupational goals, need quick entry into training, or for whom preparation for an immediate job is the first step in a longer-term skills development program, a more job-specific strategy may work better. For young people needing the strongest possible dose of reinforcement and support, the real work and intense supervision of worksite training may be the best approach. But worksite training, with its relatively high costs may not make sense for more highly skilled or motivated youth who need less support.

Whatever the options chosen, several points are clear. For all youth, some kind of work and learning connection needs to be part of any basic skills strategy. The work connection provides the relevance that young people need to see while adding an important additional tool to the instructional arsenal. But the quality of the connection is equally important. Practitioners developing and implementing a work and learning connection need to invest the same kind of time and energy in making that link as they do in developing the other major elements of their basic skills program.

SUMMARY: WORK AND LEARNING

Linking work and learning reinforces basic skills education in three major ways:

- Work experience and/or job training is a powerful motivator for young people, providing financial incentives to stay in school, a work context and rationale for learning, and a positive learning experience outside of school.

- Teaching basic skills in a "functional context" helps to ensure that the skills taught are relevant to the workplace and that students will be able to apply their skills in a variety of work-related situations.

- Many young people learn better and more quickly when basic skills are taught using "real world" problems and situations and when there is an opportunity for hands-on practice.

There are three major strategies for linking work and learning:

- A job link, which combines schooling with work experience or occupational training;

- Functional context education, which integrates workplace materials and problems into the basic skills curriculum; and

- Worksite training, which teaches basic skills through the actual work performed on the job.

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WORK AND LEARNING SUMMARY, CONTINUED

The specific strategy used must be matched to the needs of the youth being served and the goals of the program. However, there are several key elements common to all three work and learning strategies:

- **Some exposure to real work needs to be build into every basic skills program, whether it be in the form of job shadowing, summer jobs, part-time work, or on-the-job training.**
- **The work and learning connection must be clear, through the use of "no school/no work" policies, and through regular communication between basic skills instructors and worksite supervisors.**
- **Quality worksites and supervision are key, including real work for real pay and close, caring supervision.**
- **Collaboration between business, education, and employment professionals is also essential -- to develop curriculum, arrange credit and flexible work hours, and to ensure communication among instructors and supervisors.**

REINFORCING LEARNING

For many practitioners, the most difficult aspect of basic skills programming is that of motivating students to attend class and remain in the program. However effectively a program implements individualized, competency-based instruction, the young people in basic skills programs will need additional kinds of support and motivation. Rewards, incentives, job connections are all used as motivational strategies. However, the key sources for that additional reinforcement are the student's peers in the program and program staff.

Intensity and Reinforcement

Much of the reinforcement that young people need in basic skills programs is inherent in the use of an intense learning process. As noted earlier, competency-based learning provides an important degree of motivation through the frequent progress checks, concrete accomplishments, and relevant skills that help students see the value of their efforts. That sense of regular achievement helps youngsters to overcome their fears of failure and to continue to learn. Individualization and personal attention similarly reinforce learning: students feel that their own needs are being acknowledged and met. Finally, competency-based, self-paced learning also provides a sense of what Robert Taggart has called "efficacy." Students feel in control of their own education. That sense of empowerment and control appears to provide its own motivation: a number of studies have found that when students are given responsibility over the learning process in learner-managed systems, they appreciate that control and are more likely to approach reading and math tasks with sense of urgency.[1]

Incentives and Recognition

Financial incentives and other forms of recognition can also provide an important form of reinforcement. Young people need to have their efforts acknowledged and to have visible evidence of success. They need to have their often tentative commitment to learning validated on a frequent and regular basis.

Providing that validation is not hard. In many programs, the process is as simple as a weekly recognition ceremony, with certificates and awards for student

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[1] Gordon Berlin and Joanne Duhl, "Education, Equity and Economic Excellence: The Critical Role of Second Chance Basic Skills and Job Training Programs," (Ford Foundation, 1984).

attendance, for the greatest gains during the week, and the like. Some programs use donated movie passes and gift certificates as more tangible rewards for progress, while others have used cash payments as incentives for achievement. Several Jobstart sites, for example, paid students for every "A" they earned; a New York program similarly paid summer enrichment students a $5.00 bonus for every skill level they passed. While these kinds of cash awards or payment for time at the program are important, practitioners emphasize that the fundamental idea of daily recognition and praise is often an even stronger motivational force.[2]

Work and Academic Credit

Academic credit and jobs also represent important sources of reinforcement for basic skills programming. A recent report by Public/Private Ventures based on interviews with youngsters in several basic skills programs noted, for example, that in-school youth were interested in both the prospect of school gains and of work: "They were attracted to the academic component with its promise of higher grades and school credit; they were eager for job experience; and they wanted to earn money at a time in their lives when they had few other options for doing so." Paid work also provides incentives to stay in the program, the report continued. "For most students, monetary rewards were strong inducements to both enroll and remain in the program. Youth from poverty backgrounds appreciated the opportunity to make money and were grateful when payments were made on a regular basis." Discussions with practitioners for this guide produced similar comments. "We always try to combine work and education," commented one program manager. "If training holds a real promise of income, that helps retention."[3]

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[2] There is an ongoing (and perhaps endless) debate about the appropriateness of paying youngsters to learn. Many educators in particular are opposed to paying young people for attending educational programs. For most practitioners, however, financial incentives -- pay for program time, bonuses for achievement, etc. -- are valuable tools for overcoming the resistance to learning that youngsters bring to remediation efforts. As one program operator noted: "You have to pack in every incentive you can."

[3] Public/Private Ventures, Youth Motivation: At-Risk Youth Talk to Program Planners, (Public/Private Ventures: Philadelphia, PA, Summer, 1988) 29-30. CETA's Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects (YIEPP), which operated during the late 1970s, also demonstrated that the promise of a job would motivate youth to return to school (the program guaranteed a job to disadvantaged youths who remained in or returned to school). But the YIEPP message was mixed. While the program attracted dropouts back to school, it had little or no impact on the dropout rates among those in school. The lesson is that retention requires more than just the promise of a job, the program curriculum and instruction must also respond to student needs. For a brief review of the YIEPP results, see Andrew Hahn and Robert Lerman, What Works in Youth Employment Policy (Washington, D.C.: National Planning Association, Committee on New Realities, 1985), 40-44.

The Peer Connection

Clearly instructional approach, job opportunities, and recognition and incentives are important sources of motivation. However, the most significant sources of reinforcement for young people in basic skills programs are found in their connections to their peers and the adult instructors in the program, a fact which places a premium on use of groups in the learning process and on the quality of program staff. As was noted in the first chapter, while adult learners are generally perceived as independent, self-directed, goal-oriented and ready to learn, young people are driven to a much higher degree by a desire to be accepted by their peers and by caring adults. As a result, most successful basic skills programs -- including those grounded in individualized, self-paced learning -- include opportunities to develop those personal bonds in their program design.

"Social Connections" and Retention. The importance of that peer group connection is a consistent theme in both the published literature and interviews with practitioners. Eileen Foley and Peggy Crull's study of alternative school programs in New York City, for example, found that the students most likely to drop out of alternative high school programs were those who had the fewest social relations or who felt most isolated, often because work prevented them from participating in school-related friendship or activities. The "failure to connect with the school in a personal way", the report's authors argued, was a key factor in dropping out. Similarly, where students were involved in experimental external learning programs, such as New York's "City as School" program, a number of young people still dropped out. The stimulation of external learning, Foley and Crull noted, did not provide "enough social-emotional connection to hold them in school."[4]

Discussions with practitioners have echoed the importance of those peer ties. One Boston practitioner put it well when he commented that "the key issue in retention is how attached students feel to their peers and the program." "Young people want to belong," another practitioner commented. "You need to help build that sense of group cohesion and support if you want your kids to stick around."

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[4] Eileen Foley and Peggy Crull, Educating the At-Risk Adolescent: More Lessons from Alternative Schools (New York: Public Education Association, 1984), v-viii.

A Mix of Group and Individual Activities. For most of these practitioners, the importance of peer connections highlighted the need to balance individualized, self-paced instruction with at least some group activities. Those activities varied widely. In some programs, several traditional academic subjects, such as social studies and science, were taught in a group setting. In others, group activities focused on developing verbal communication and problem-solving skills. A number of programs focused group activities on counseling, life skills issues, and in some cases recreation, with discussions about family and work concerns and attendance at local cultural events. In a number of national programs, including 70001 and Jobs for America's Graduates, motivational group activities represent a key, formally structured program component.

Whatever the particular activity involved, the consistent theme among successful programs was the need to provide opportunities for young people to build a group identity and, equally important, to provide some variety in the daily routine. As one instructor commented, "if you don't mix things up, it just gets boring." One of the developers of the Summer Training and Education Program (STEP) program at Public/Private Ventures, noting the use of group activities in that demonstration, made a similar point. While group work is seen by some practitioners as somewhat less essential in short-term summer programs because of their relatively brief duration, he reiterated that "summer kids are not an adult population. Younger students in particular can't do just seatwork. Even in a brief program the youth need group work and motivational projects to provide variety and give added interest to their work." When the initial year of STEP failed to provide that group connection, that practitioner noted, the program was much less successful.[5]

[5] The importance of group activities for reinforcement and retention was also one of the lessons drawn from a series of studies of alternative schools. In discussing a group counseling activity, one study noted "From our observation, each group is an ongoing forum for problem solving.... It is a context to develop fostering relationships in which students can seek help from adults and their peers and learn to give help to others." The authors went on to note that the small group sessions, as a means of setting standards and creating peer support, were at the heart of the alternative schools' attendance strategies. Eileen M. Foley and Susan B. McConnaughy, Toward School Improvement: Lessons from Alternative High Schools (NY: Public Education Association, 1982) 40.

Caring and Committed Staff

The other vital source of reinforcement is a caring and committed staff. As one practitioner explained: "If you ask kids why they dropped out, they say they didn't understand the work, they were confused. What they mean is that there was no teacher support. That teacher bonding is critical. Teachers working with kids who have already experienced failure have to be able to build trust, to speak the kids' language, to instill self-esteem."

Similar comments came from other practitioners. "Teachers set the atmosphere for a program," one noted. "They need to know the kids by name, to care, to know about their lives." "Education is still very much a person to person activity," noted another. You can't replace quality staff with programmatic frills." "If the staff believes in the program," said a third, "it will work."[6]

Teacher Roles. The development of a caring and committed staff is the sum of many kinds of choices. The student/teacher ratio in a program is one major element. Most practitioners felt that a ration of 15-20 students per instructor was the maximum. A second element is the approach that instructors take toward teaching. Practitioners emphasized that a teacher's role in an individualized, self-paced learning environment is very different from that in a traditional classroom. Their primary role is as a facilitator, tutor and cheerleader rather than as a presenter or someone skilled in

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[6] The interviews summarized in P/PV's Youth Motivation and surveys conducted as part of the Jobstart demonstration project point to much the same conclusion. The P/PV report noted, for example, that "many [youth] mentioned either a relationship with a teacher or supervisor or the team spirit within their class as the most positive aspect of program participation." (31) When Jobstart participants were asked what they like about the program, the most frequent answer (28%) was the personal attention from teachers and staff. (Individualized, self-paced instruction was identified by 18% of the respondents; only 8-9% identified use of computers or linkage of education and training as elements they particularly liked.) Patricia Auspos et al, Implementing Jobstart: A Demonstration for School Dropouts in the JTPA System, (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, June, 1989), 95.

Bernard Lefkowits made much the same point very well in his book on troubled youth, Tough Change: Growing Up on Your Own in America (New York: Free Press, 1987), 269. He wrote: "... the most important innovation [in schools] will not occur by changing the curriculum or introducing computers. It will be the presence of a core teacher, a mentor, an adult to whom the students are responsible, and who is responsible to them. Somebody who can define what the center of the beehive is all about -- the reason for going on, for learning, for growing up. Somebody who knows as much about what the students face outside the school as about their performance in the classroom. When a kid disappears, the core teacher/mentor doesn't respond by shredding the kid's card in the rollbook. He finds out what's happened to him and why, and tries to make education, in whatever shape or form, accessible to the lost child.

"Again and again, I found the same pattern was repeated: the kid who managed to climb out of the morass of poverty and social pathology was the kid who found somebody, usually in school, sometimes outside, who helped him invent a promising future. In practical terms, the presence of the understanding, concerned, yet demanding mentor transforms the meaning and quality of education."

SELECTING EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF

Careful selection, training, and supervision is necessary to ensure that instructional staff have the competence and maturity to gain the respect of the young people; a productive working and learning partnership can only grow out of such trust and respect. Some of the general attributes that program administrators might look for in selecting instructional staff should include:

Experience With Youth. A primary qualification sought in a teacher is a genuine interest in young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged and who have not succeeded in school. Experience working with youth and with youth programs is also helpful, since, although no two people (and no two programs, for that matter) are exactly alike, it is easier for those who have some familiarity with youngsters and with the demands of programs to orient themselves during their first few weeks of work.

Maturity. Although it is not easy to screen prospective staff for evidence of maturity, it is important that adults who work with young people possess the patience and judgement necessary to handle the demands of working with slow learners, handicapped or delinquent youth, and youth with low self-esteem. Likewise, the teacher must have sufficient self-confidence to push on in the face of setbacks, disappointments, and frustration. A commitment to learning -- and a belief in a program's specific approach -- reinforce the necessary self-confidence and help the teacher to steer a steady course through the most trying times.

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controlling a classroom.

Several practitioners also noted that the best teachers are those comfortable and experienced in teaching basic skills. "The most helpful quality of teachers," one survey of learners found, "was the way they gave clear and simple explanations." In that regard, Richard Lacey, in his monograph on basic skill education, makes the point that most high school teachers are subject experts and have limited experience teaching basic reading or math. Others seconded that idea, and added that elementary school teachers were often very effective instructors since their training had focused much

SELECTING INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF, Continued

Ability to Communicate. Communication skills -- listening, explaining, conveying approval or disapproval clearly and at appropriate times -- will naturally be refined through experience in staff work with young people. Still, the beginning teacher must already possess basic communications skills, and should be a person who finds it easy to communicate openly with other people.

Ability to Learn from Experience. Like any teacher, one will find that the job requires both foresight and hindsight. Again, these qualities will be further developed on the job, but the basic abilities must be there from the start. Having foresight does not mean that one keeps a crystal ball in the tool box or desk -- no one can predict the future. Still, a good "teacher" (or good counselor, or parent) should be able to help young people look beyond the immediate and anticipate the consequences of their actions. At the same time, an effective teacher needs to look backwards, and learn from experience. ("Let's see, the last time Jim asked to work by himself, it was because he and Karen were having an argument. That doesn't seem to be the case today, but maybe that incident can give me some clues....")

Energy. Finally, and most importantly, an effective "teacher" must be endowed with boundless energy.

Adapted from material prepared for The Smokey House Project.

more on teaching basic skills and student motivation.[7]

The key element, however, is a staff that is not only caring, but knowledgeable about youth. While providing reinforcement, basic skills staff also have to be able to provide the structure and discipline that adolescents need. As adolescents, students will continually test the limits of the program: what can I get away with? Effective teachers need to be able to establish and enforce clear rules and help young people recognize

[7] Quotation is in Miriam Balmuth, "Essential Characteristics of Effective Adult Literacy Programs: A Review and Analysis of the Research (New York: Hunter College of the City University of New York, 1987), 25. Richard Lacey, Basic Skills for Disadvantaged Youth; Lessons From Youth Programs, No. 5 (Salt Lake: Olympus Publishing, 1983).

how the structure of the program reflects future workplace demands.

In the end, the message from practitioners is that considerations of staff, peer interaction, incentives and recognition are as critical to effective program design as decisions about instructional approach, curriculum and connections to work. For youngsters who have failed in school and question their own ability and value as individuals, the reinforcement they gain through positive, supportive relationships in a basic skills program are critical factors in their ability to stay in a program long enough to learn and succeed.

SUMMARY: REINFORCING LEARNING

The most significant sources of reinforcement for young people in basic skills programs are their connections to their peers and a caring instructional staff. In addition to the use of work, academic credit, and incentives and awards for motivation, basic skills program should:

- Balance individualized, self-paced instruction with group activities, such as small group instruction in life skills or some academic subjects, group counseling, recreational activities, etc.
- Maintain a low student/teach ratio.
- Recruit instructors who are comfortable teaching in an individualized, self-paced environment, who are experienced in teaching basic skills, and who are knowledgeable about youth.

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

The final element in effective basic skills programming is frequently summarized as a "supportive environment." As suggested earlier, basic skills problems often represent only one barrier among many that a young person needs to address. Family and personal problems, the need for immediate employment, issues of self-esteem and fears of failure all call on a young person's energy and attention and can easily sap a student's commitment to his or her own education. Consequently, for basic skills programs to succeed in attracting and retaining young people, practitioners need to pay attention to what happens outside, as well as inside the classroom -- to the kinds of support services and counseling needed to help young people stay in the program, and to the environment in which learning takes place.

Building An Attractive Environment

One of the consistent themes in this guide is that for basic skills programs to attract and motivate young people, they need to be careful to reinforce the learning process in every way possible and to not recreate the atmosphere of the traditional classroom. Individualized, competency-based instruction, linking work and learning, and supportive relationships with peers and teachers provide much of this needed reinforcement. But it is equally important to create a physical and social environment that respects the independence, pride and maturity of the students. Though often "only" teenagers, the youth in basic skills programs are frequently dealing with adult demands in their lives. They do not see themselves as children. As a result, one guide notes, "the educational setting, teacher, materials, and approach should respect the learner as an adult, rather than as a "remedial" adolescent."[1]

Create an Open and Relaxed Setting. There are many ways in which programs can convey that respect and create an attractive learning environment for youth. All are important, and few are very difficult. In terms of physical environment, practitioners emphasize the need to create an open, relaxed, non-threatening setting. "Don't set up

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[1] Kay Hupp Sardo, "Guidelines for Jobstart's Educational Component," (Prepared for the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, April, 1985), 4.

your classroom in rows like at school," commented one practitioner. "Create an informal atmosphere where kids can work together or chat." Hold classes in non-traditional settings another advised: "kids will get excited about attending classes at a local college or a company, for example." As noted earlier, worksite learning in particular helps to reinforce the connections between jobs and education and can provide an important element of motivation.

Safety and Convenience. Program settings also need to be safe and convenient. One of the reasons students frequently cite for dropping out of high school, several studies note, is that they do not feel safe in the school building. Studies of alternative schools note the importance of keeping programs small, building a cohesive atmosphere, providing teachers with training on mediating conflict, and establishing strict rules governing outside visitors as key elements in reducing the threat of violence and in making schools feel secure.[2] Similarly, the more difficult it is for students to get to the learning site -- because of a poor location -- the less likely that they will persist in attending. Because of this, adult programs are increasingly using shopping mall storefronts and other frequently visited locations for learning center locations; youth programs could do the same. Worksite learning, or the use of the school building as a worksite, is another way of reducing the transportation difficulties faced by program participants. Many communities that combine work and learning in their summer youth programs (half-day work/half-day school) have solved their transportation problems by making the school the worksite. In Boston, for example, classes for the STEP program are held on the campuses of three local universities. The universities then provide students with summer jobs in the university offices. In rural sections of several states, summer program participants have summer jobs repairing and maintaining the school buildings where their basic skills classes take place.

Open Entry/Open Exit. Practitioners also suggest that, ideally, basic skills programs should be open entry/open exit, allowing students to adjust their participation to fit

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[2] Andrew Hahn, Jacqueline Dansberger, and Bernard Lefkowits, Dropouts in America: Enough is Known for Action (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, March, 1987), 19; Eileen M. Foley and Susan B. McConnaughy, Towards School Improvement: Lessons from Alternative High Schools (New York: Public Education Association, 1982) 24, 45-47.

their schedules. For in-school youth, open entry/open exit learning essentially means individualized, self-paced learning. Though classes may work on a semester basis and at a set time of day, students begin and complete each learning unit at their own pace. But for older, out-of-school youth, true open entry/open exit learning, in which students enter and exit the learning site at the times most convenient to them, becomes increasingly important. While programs may need to balance an open entry/open exit approach with set times for counseling or group activities, an individualized, open entry/open exit strategy recognizes the multiple demands facing students and gives them an opportunity to accommodate work schedules, family crises, or other demands on their time.

It is worth noting that open entry/open exit may not be appropriate in every program. Like many program decisions, the value of an open entry/open exit approach needs to be evaluated in light of the program's goals and the population being served. While the freedom to come and go at different times works very well for youth and adults who are relatively motivated and ready to work, it may be less appropriate for others. In many programs, for example, regular attendance policies are an essential means of reinforcing work maturity skills and of ensuring that students have sufficient time on task to maintain learning gains. In other cases, group activities form an essential element of the program design. In those kinds of situations, a more structured approach to program participation -- though still individualized and self-paced -- may better meet the needs of the youth involved.

Don't Call It Remediation. The physical setting and organization of the program send important messages. In the same way, the name for a program and the way in which it is presented is a critical element in its "environment." As one practitioner put it, "Don't call the program "Remedial Education" -- no student wants to think of him or herself as needing remediation." Instead, practitioners recommend names that convey a positive and practical image: "Practical Academics," (the name for the STEP curriculum), "Advanced Studies," "Fundamental Skills," "Skills Enhancement" Program," and the like. "As much as an exciting learning site -- like a college campus -- can attract students," a practitioner noted, "the wrong name can keep them away."

A Caring Staff. Finally, as has already been discussed, a caring and supportive staff is perhaps the most essential element in creating an attractive environment. "Students need to feel that there are people who know them and care how and what they do," noted numerous practitioners. "They need to emphasize the specialness of every youngster, and to send the message that all people can succeed and that everyone has something they are good at. That is the focus of a caring staff."

Counseling and Supportive Services

An attractive environment makes a program more inviting for students. But basic skills programs also need to acknowledge the life concerns of students and to provide appropriate support services and counseling. Without that support, a number of studies note, retention will be a major problem. The recent implementation report on the Jobstart demonstration, for example, noted that among that project's ten sites, which had larger than average support service budgets, approximately one third of the participants dropped out for reasons external to the program: childcare problems, pregnancy, family difficulties, or the need for immediate employment. It can be assumed that without those services, the attrition rate would have been even higher. Similarly, studies of school dropouts have found that as many as 40% of the dropouts cited family difficulties or personal problems as the reason for leaving school.[3]

These kinds of figures have led researchers and practitioners to conclude that no program can succeed without some form of support services; in general, the more comprehensive, the better. The Jobstart report concluded, for example, that "at a minimum, programs should provide assistance for training-related expenses such as childcare, meals, and transportation." Where program-provided supports are not sufficient to meet basic living needs (rent, food, etc.), the report continued, participants will generally need help securing other sources of support such as AFDC or part-time

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[3] Patricia Auspos et al, Implementing Jobstart: A Demonstration for School Dropouts in the JTPA System (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, June 1989) 79. In emphasising the importance of supportive services, it is worth noting that substantially fewer students, approximately 20%, left Jobstart because they did not like the program or couldn't meet its requirements. The dropout survey figures can be found in Nancy F. Conklin and Janise Hurtig, Making the Connection: A Report for Literacy Volunteers Working with Out-of-School Youth, (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, June, 1986), 16-19. The 40% figure is from a survey of "street youth." Other national surveys noted, for example, that 23% of the young women that dropped out of school cited pregnancy as the reason; 26% of the young men cited employment; and more than 30% of both men and women indicated that "school was not for me."

employment.[4] Most practitioners interviewed for this guide went further: "You need to be able to provide a full array of services," argued one director, "health, education, employment, psychological and sexual counseling, advocacy, case management. You need to provide practical assistance, and you need to find some ways of dealing with the cynicism and passivity that most kids bring to a program."

Counseling and Case Management are Key. For most practitioners, the most critical support services were counseling and case management -- terms that were often used interchangeably. "Counseling," one program manager argued, "is the key to retention. When it is working, 80% of the kids in a program will stay. When that part of the package falls apart, kids leave." The Jobstart report called counseling "the linchpin of the program," and similarly cited it as a major strategy for retention.[5]

In talking about counseling, practitioners identified a wide variety of essential services and roles. On the one hand, a number of practitioners pointed to psychological counseling -- even ongoing therapy -- as a necessary adjunct to their programs. "Counseling is essential for dealing with behavioral problems and with individual and group dynamics," one program manager noted. "For many of these kids, counseling needs to include psychological counseling and therapy, not just career advice." Others talked about counseling as a blend of personal support, counseling and case management. When working with dropouts and other at-risk youth, several practitioners argued, programs need to provide ongoing reinforcement, hand-holding, and help in solving problems. "You need someone who can call the kids at home, develop parent involvement and support, arrange services, and track the kids throughout the program," one practitioner commented. "You also need someone to help mediate the connections to jobs and training," a second added. A third noted that counseling and case management support are especially important when a young person first joins a program: "when you are picking up 18 years of problems. Later on, kids will develop their own problem-solving skills and the need for support will be less."

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[4] Implementing Jobstart, 177.

[5] Implementing Jobstart, 83, 177-78.

Making the Necessary Connections. The way in which programs organize their counseling and case management functions will depend on their institutional resources and those in the surrounding community. Some programs may have their own counselors on staff and provide support services with their own program funds; others may have in-house counselors, but refer to other agencies for day care, medical assistance, etc.; others may develop partnerships with community agencies who provide all the counseling services.[6] Finally, the counseling may be built into the role of the crew leader/supervisor or teacher. But no matter how the counseling is organized, there are several features that are essential if it is to work:

- Counseling must be easily accessible -- in the same building as the basic skills activities, or nearby. When the counseling is at one end of town and the program is at the other, one practitioner noted, "it is a recipe for disaster!"

- Counseling must be timely. One of the reasons that it is best to have counselors nearby is so they can respond to student absences and tardiness or to discipline problems at the time they take place rather than a few hours or a few days later. The Jobstart report put it well: "Good counselors and instructors will identify problems before they become crises and work with students outside the classroom and confines of the program to address barriers to program participation and employment."[7]

- Counseling must be connected to teaching and work. For counselors to be able to anticipate problems and support the work and learning process, they must know what is going on in the classroom and the worksite. Counselors need to meet regularly with teaching staff and worksite supervisors, and they need to visit worksites and classrooms on a regular basis.

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[6] One program that has a partnership with local CBOs for counseling services is the Young Adult Learning Academy in New York City. See the article by its Director, Peter Kleinbard, for a description: "The Young Adult Learning Academy: A Program for Youth Who Are Out of School," Equity and Choice, V, no. 3 (May, 1989) 45-53.

[7] Implementing Jobstart, 83, 177. Italics added.

- Counseling/Case Management has to be based in ongoing relationships between institutions. Put simply, basic skills programs need to take the time to develop clear ties to appropriate day care, health, or other social service agencies so that when problems are identified and referrals are made, there is a process already in place to assure action.[8]

A Stable Institution

The final aspect of a "supportive environment," and of effective basic skills programming generally, is the creation of a stable institution. As a number of practitioners noted, dropouts and other at-risk youth may need several years of work before their skills are significantly improved. They may need to leave a program and return, and they will definitely need some continuity in the program and the staff if they are not to feel that they are starting over time and time again. "You need a stable institution," one director argued, "that will allow youngsters to join and leave, and that will still be there when they are ready to come back."

At the same time, as all of this guide should suggest, it takes time and effort to build an effective basic skills program. Time to select and modify curriculum, to find and train capable staff, to establish links with quality worksites, and to establish partnerships with other agencies and institutions for counseling or support services. It is no coincidence that most of what we know works come from programs -- like the Job Corps -- that have had the time and institutional support to plan, experiment, and grow. Basic skills programming is not a short-term effort. To make it work, administrators need to be willing to make an investment in building an effective program or institution over the long term.

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[8] See the Center for Human Resource's "A Guide to Case Management for At-Risk Youth" for a discussion of case management strategies and the importance of defining institutional partnerships. Also see the Fall, 1988, issue of Youth Programs (also published by the Center for Human Resources at Brandeis University) for a discussion of case management.

SUMMARY: SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Basic skills programs need to reinforce what goes on inside the classroom by creating an attractive physical and social environment and by providing the support services students need to be able stay in the program. Key elements of a supportive environment include:

- **An open and relaxed setting, including the use of nontraditional instructional settings such as colleges and worksites.**
- **A safe and convenient location.**
- **Open entry/open exit programming.**
- **A positive and practical image for the program (do not call it remediation!).**
- **A caring and supportive staff.**
- **Counseling and access to support services such as transportation assistance, child care, health services, psychological counseling, etc.**

The most critical support services are counseling and case management -- a blend of career and psychological counseling, personal support, and assistance in securing needed services. To be successful, counseling/case management must be easily accessible, timely, connected to teaching and work, and based in ongoing relationships between institutions.

PUTTING BASIC SKILLS INTO ACTION

A major goal of this guide has been to define a set of principles that youth employment practitioners and decision makers can use in planning, designing and evaluating basic skills programs in their communities. To put those principles into practice, however, PIC members, administrators, and program planners also need to create a local policy context that supports and encourages the integration of basic skills into youth employment. Policy changes at the federal level and in many states have opened the door for the longer-term, more intensive programming required to serve youth with substantial basic skills deficits. But local policy decisions regarding costs, contracting, and performance standards can have an even greater impact on the development of new programs and on program quality. A commitment to serving those youth most at-risk, the definition of outcomes that promote program quality, and the willingness to pay for appropriately for services are essential to creating an environment in which successful basic skills programming can take place.

A Commitment to Serving the Most At Risk

The most important policy decision that PICs and SDAs must make is the decision to invest in the longer-term, more comprehensive programs needed to build the skills of at-risk youth. For much of JTPA's early history, that kind of commitment was difficult to make at the local level because of JTPA's heavy policy emphasis on job placement and low program costs -- SDAs operating programs for high risk youth ran the risk of failing to meet their performance standards or of losing access to incentive funds as a result of their higher costs and lower placements.

Performance Standards Revisions Have Reduced the Barriers to Comprehensive Programs. The revision of JTPA's performance standards system in 1988, and subsequent state-level changes in performance standards policies, have reduced those barriers substantially. At the federal level, the creation of the Youth Employability Enhancement performance measure emphasized the importance of the basic and occupational skills necessary to enter the workforce and encouraged the development of programs integrating basic skills education with work skills or occupational skills training. The establishment of a relatively high youth cost standard also opened the

door for more intensive programming (at $4900 per positive termination the standard is substantially higher than the cost of many basic skills programs). Many states have responded to these federal initiatives by adopting the enhancement standard and by reducing or eliminating the use of the cost standard in determining incentive awards. The result has been the development of a state and federal policy environment that sets the stage for local investments in basic skills services.[1]

A Positive Commitment is Required. But while the barriers to more intensive programming have been reduced, local policy makers still need to recognize that services to more at-risk youth involve trade-offs in terms of performance and the numbers of youth served, and that a positive commitment to the development of long term employability skills is required. Basic skills programs serving youth with substantial skills deficits are often more expensive than many traditional JTPA training and placement programs and can require a substantial initial investment. As services to more at-risk youth grow, the risks of failure are also higher. The longer a program, and the more difficult the problems faced by participating youth, the more likely participants will drop out before program completion. Start-up problems and the need to adjust and refine program designs also often mean relatively poor performance during the first year or two of a new program.

In making a commitment to basic skills education, local decision makers need to be aware of these increased costs and risks and be willing to accept their programmatic and political implications. The decision to invest in more intensive services for those most at risk, for example, is likely to mean serving fewer youth in the community. A commitment to serving youth with substantial basic skills problems means accepting that the SDA may be less likely to exceed its performance standards and may receive a reduced performance incentive award as a result. While there is a clear national policy consensus that more intensive investments in those youth most at risk have a greater impact in terms of increased employability, the decision to serve fewer youth or to

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[1] For a full discussion of state and local performance management issues, see the Center for Human Resources' report for the Department of Labor, Region V, Youth Performance Management Task Force: "Working It Out: An Anthology of State and Local Performance Management Strategies Designed to Increase Services to Youth At Risk of Chronic Unemployment," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, February, 1989), 2 volumes. An abridged version of the report is available from the Center for Human Resources as a special issue of its newsletter Youth Programs.

accept a lower placement rate can be a difficult one in any given community.[2]

SDAs can reduce the performance standards impact of these decisions in a number of ways: by requesting an adjustment in its standards from the state to account for program start-up and increased service to higher risk populations; by using funds not included in performance standards calculations (such as JTPA's 8% Education Coordination funds and, in some states, JTPA 6% incentive award funds); and by developing a program mix that includes a balanced menu of more and less intensive programs. But at a fundamental level, the development of an effective community basic skills strategy requires the recognition that basic skills programming for at-risk youth, and the development of long term employability generally, is a strategic investment in the future workforce. Without that commitment, it is unlikely that schools, community organizations and others will make the investments of time and resources to develop effective programs.[3]

Recognizing the Differences Among Programs

The development of a supportive policy environment for basic skills, however, requires more than a broad commitment to basic skills programming. It requires local performance management policies that recognize the differences among basic skills programs and the populations they serve, and that establish appropriate cost and performance standards.

One of the major themes of this guide has been the need to develop a variety of basic skills strategies to meet the diverse needs and goals of the youth in a community -- summer remediation programs aimed at preventing learning loss, GED programs for high school dropouts with an intermediate level of skills, longer-term programs for out-of-school youth needing intensive basic skills and work skills assistance, and so on. Not surprisingly, the duration, costs and expected outcomes for

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[2] The case for more intensive investment by JTPA programs in services for those most at risk is clearly stated in the report of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Advisory Committee, "Working Capital: JTPA Investments for the 90's," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, March, 1989).

[3] See the State Strategies section of "Working It Out" for a discussion of performance standards adjustment options. Also see the U.S. Department of Labor's "Guide for Setting JPTA Title II-A Performance Standards for PY 88," (Washington: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Strategic Planning and Policy Development, 1988) for instructions on performance standards adjustments.

these programs vary substantially. The costs of adding basic skills instruction to the summer jobs program, providing a limited number of hours of instruction to in-school youth, can be as low as a $500-600 per student. Programs serving youth with an intermediate level of skills (for example, reading at a 7th-8th grade reading level or an equivalent functional skills level), which aim at acquisition of a GED or entry into training or employment might require 200-300 hours of instruction over a three to six month period of time at an average cost of $2000 and $3000 per student. Programs serving youth who are essentially pre-employable (e.g. reading below a 5th-7th grade level and lacking significant work experience) may require a year or more of instruction at a cost of $5,000 or more for each student.[4]

Contract Standards Need to Reflect Program Differences. Local performance management policies need to recognize these differences in several ways. First, for SDAs that contract out for basic skills services, cost, retention, and placement standards need to reflect the goals of the program and the population being served. Too often, PICs and SDAs have dealt with basic skills programs as a single, homogenous mass, applying the same cost, retention, positive termination, and placement standards to all local programs without regard for the fact that one program may be providing basic literacy services to high risk youth while another may be providing GED classes to young people with relatively strong reading and math skills. Similarly, many SDAs/PICs have simply passed along their JTPA performance standards to their service providers without taking into account the differences in program services and goals. In both cases, programs serving hard-to-serve youth are forced to struggle to meet unrealistic cost or placement goals, while programs serving more job ready youth benefit by providing less costly services. As the recent Region V Task Force report on

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[4] Public/Private Ventures estimates that the summer remediation component of its STEP demonstration, which provides 90 hours of basic skills instruction for 14-15 year old youth, costs less than $600 per enrollee, with substantially lower costs in some sites. See Cynthia L. Sipe, Jean Baldwin Grossman, and Julita A. Milliner, Summer Training and Education Program: Report on the 1987 Experience (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1988), 198. Also see the discussions of the Los Angeles and the Michigan youth contracting models in Center for Human Resources, "Working It Out: An Anthology of State and Local Performance Management Strategies Designed to Increase Services to Youth At Risk of Chronic Unemployment," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, February, 1989). The Los Angeles contracting model, for example, allocates up to $10,000 per student for services to those with the lowest level of basic skills, including the costs for basic skills instruction, work experience, and support services.

performance management put it, effective contracting policies need to be developed around the accountability principle: "get what you pay for and pay for what you get." (See the box on the following page.)[5]

Defining Quality Outcomes. Equally important, local policy makers need to define program outcomes that are appropriate for the population being served while representing real gains. On one level, this means that where performance-based contracts are used, SDAs define interim payment benchmarks that are measurable and achievable so that service providers can afford to provide a long-term sequence of services to those youth most at risk.

On another level, the definition of appropriate interim and final outcomes means establishing standards for "competency attainment" or "positive termination" that relate to a youth's initial skill level but that also reflect real progress toward employability.

The definition of those standards presents a critical challenge to local decision makers. While most practitioners agree that the best final outcome for any youth employment program is employment in a quality job, there is less agreement about what kind of interim outcome for those youth requiring longer-term, intensive basic skills services would represent an appropriate gain. How much of an increase in basic skills represents a minimum standard for success? If the standards are set unreasonably high, providers will find it difficult to get paid for the real gains they achieve with youth, and the SDA as a whole may fail to meet its performance standards. If set too low, local standards fail to encourage program operators to provide high quality programs and to produce meaningful gains.

A Combination of Incremental and Absolute Standards Can Recognize Differences While Promoting Quality. While there are no simple answers to the development of local standards, several points are clear. First, growing numbers of communities are recognizing that neither absolute standards, which require every youth to reach a

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[5] The issue of appropriate contract standards was also one of the key implementation issues noted in the Jobstart implementation reports. See Patricia Auspos and Marylin Price, Launching Jobstart: A Demonstration for Dropouts in the JTPA System (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1987) and Patricia Auspos, et al, Implementing Job Start: A Demonstration for School Dropouts in the JTPA System, New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, June, 1989).

FIVE CONTRACTING PRINCIPLES

As practitioners and policy makers have begun to consider how to use performance-based contracts to encourage increased services to at-risk youth, they have identified five elements to guide the contracting process. An effective contract, they have suggested:

- is developed around the key accountability principle: "get what you pay for and pay for what you get." In other words, the costs in a contract should vary with the difficulty and the length of time involved in the task. In the case of a contract in a multi-tiered system, costs would vary with the level of employability of the entering youth and his or her need for support services.

- employs payment benchmarks that are measurable and achievable.

- shares the risk of serving high-risk youth by paying for time spent *and* for achievement of benchmarks. We need to acknowledge that as we attempt to increase the proportion of high risk youth in our mix of participants, we simultaneously increase the contractor's risk of failure. It becomes necessary, therefore, to build in some incentives and safeguards for the contractor (this is especially relevant for hybrid contracts that are at once performance based and cost reimbursement).

- seek to recognize and reward youth participants for learning gains by providing "learning reinforcement payments" for progress.

- motivates contractors to increase services for high risk youth.

From Center for Human Resources, "Working It Out," p. 18.

specified level of skills, nor incremental standards, which define attainment solely in terms of relative gains (e.g. a one-grade level or a five point gain in reading and math) are satisfactory. Absolute standards, while acknowledging the requirements of employers, fail to provide any reasonable exit points for those youth starting with low level skills. Incremental standards, on the other hand, often reward gains that do not represent real improvements in employability (e.g. an increase from a fifth to a sixth grade reading level). For many of these communities, the solution rests in a multi-tiered approach, in which attainment is defined in terms of movement from one level of employability to the next higher (e.g. from a "basic" level to "intermediate").[6]

The second point is that the definition of any particular set of standards must be supported by appropriate contracting policies. While local policy makers need to define local performance standards in ways that will encourage high performance programming, they need to be willing to pay the costs of those programs and share the risks with their program providers.

A Collaborative Process

The final point to be made is that basic skills policy development, as well as program design, must be a collaborative process. On the program level, JTPA administrators, schools, businesses and social service agencies need to work together to identify the needs of at-risk youth, to develop programs that link work and learning, to organize case management systems and provide needed support services. On the systems/policy level, JTPA policy makers, administrators and services providers also have to work collaboratively along with employers, educators and others to define the basic skills that young people in the community need and to set performance standards and payment policies that are workable for all the parties involved. It is through this "top down/bottom up" process, in which policy makers and providers work together to define mutually acceptable standards and goals, that the most effective policies and programs are designed.

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[6] One of the papers developed for the U.S. Department of Labor,Region V, Youth Performance Management Task Force provides a valuable discussion of effective contracting processes and of the basic skills contracting model being developed in Michigan. See John Haycook and Karen West, "Increasing Services to At-Risk Youth Utilizing RFP and Contracting Procedures," in Center for Human Resources, "Working It Out: An Anthology of State and Local Performance Management Strategies Designed to Increase Services to Youth At Risk of Chronic Unemployment; (Volume II:Options Papers and Sample Policies)," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, February, 1989).

In the end, while the "principles" of effective basic skills education are clear -- intensity, linking work and learning, reinforcement, and a supportive environment -- their translation into effective, operating programs has to come through the collaborative efforts of practitioners, policy makers, employers and others interested in improving the skills of at-risk youth. As we said at the beginning of this guide, the development of effective basic skills programs is not a simple task. It is only through a collaborative effort that practical programs can be designed, that the problems of implementation can be solved, and that the needs of those youth most at risk can be effectively met.

SUMMARY: PUTTING BASIC SKILLS INTO ACTION

To put effective basic skills principles into practice, local decision makers need to create a local policy context that supports and encourages the integration of basic skills into youth employment. Key elements of that policy context include:

- A commitment to serving those youth most at-risk of chronic unemployment, including a recognition of the increased costs and risks that a strategic investment in basic skills programs may involve.
- A recognition of the differences among programs and the development of contract standards that reflect those differences.
- The definition of interim and final program outcomes that reflect the initial skill levels of the youth being served while also requiring meaningful progress toward employability.
- The development of a collaborative policy and program development process that involves providers and employers as well as policy makers in establishing workable performance policies.

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